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THE GREAT GAME

by

H. C. BAILEY

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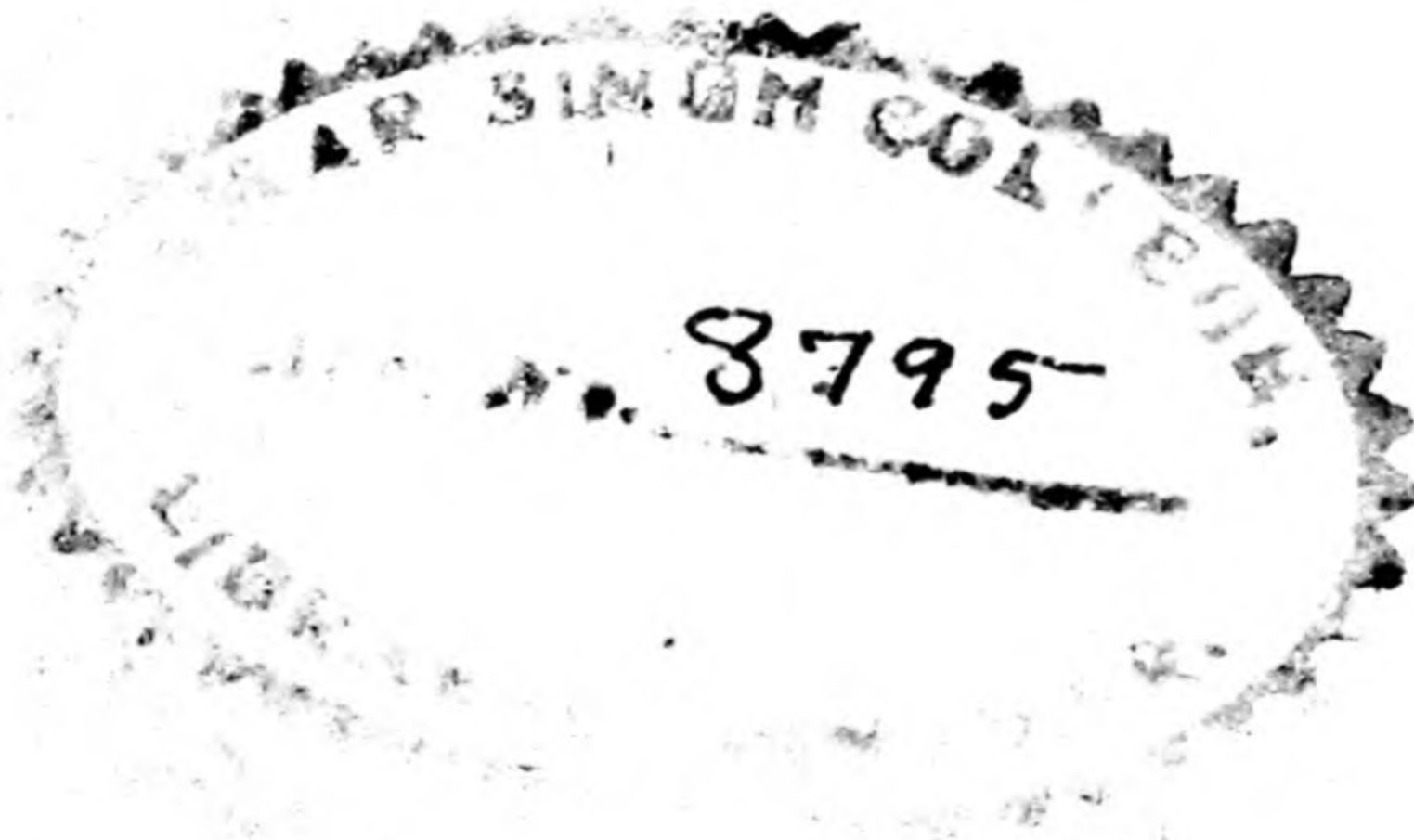
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WARNING

All the persons and events in this book are
entirely imaginary. Nothing in it is derived
from anything which ever happened.

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CHAPTER I

TWO RINGS OF THE MARY BELL

ACROSS THE BRIGHT air of an evening in June a church bell called with one deep, clear note, then another, not so full, which shivered away into the chorus of birds and bees and rustling wind.

Mr. Fortune now describes this ringing of the Mary bell as the first observed effort of the nature of things to force upon human minds need for action against the powers of evil working in the parish of Hurst.

He is fond of preaching that the natural order of the world is arrayed for the overthrow of sinners and gives information of their knavish tricks by resentment, by symptoms of the abnormal, as the body announces disease. Those on the side of the angels, he assures you, if they will only observe the evidence provided for them and take the trouble to understand it, have always the means to victory.

Other men of science and policemen, generally patient in derision of this cheerful faith, "one of Fortune's fancies", become irritated when he maintains that it was established for ever by his work upon the Hurst iniquity.

A singular confusion of circumstance in the setting of the crimes obscured the uncalculated tangle of their development, the interference of passion with a subtlety of daring invention. The case is ranked by Mr. Fortune as the most difficult he ever had. His chief antagonist holds a place apart among his memories. To no other, escaped or convicted, has he paid a like honour of tragic respect. He is rather prone to humility over the course of the

struggle than pride in the issue. Insisting, more than some approve, on the power of the spirit against him, his conclusion is that he ought to have done better.

When the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department first offered compliments on this unusual modesty, he was told not to bother. "Case has its lessons, Lomas. More confidence in myself next time."

"My dear Reginald!" Lomas exhibited horror and alarm. "Not that, for God's sake!"

"Oh yes. Rather. Quite a lot more. Bein' well assured I hadn't enough. My only fault."

The call of the bell from Hurst church tower did not reach his ears, for he was many miles away in his Cotswold garden, brooding over the lateness of the roses. Summer came slowly in that year. Thereby the course of the case was directed. Out of the lag of the season nature furnished some crucial evidence and he used it, though not as first he hoped.

When the bell rang he had never seen Hurst. This ignorance many persons of nice taste envy. An old chronicler called the region "a horrid waste". Now the correct judgment is, the abomination of desolation, an awful example of the uglifying of the country. But other opinions are held.

Hurst parish stretches over miles of sandy lowland and sandstone hill. Two old roads cross it, the primeval green track on the high ground called, heaven knows why, the Devil's Highway, and the main road which the Romans built across the flats, where the railway also rattles and rumbles now. Till twenty years ago, few people ever lived in the horrid waste. Of all the fifty thousand acres of the parish, only a few hundred were worth farming, even in the golden age of farmers, and its woods are scrub.

They burnt charcoal, they made iron there once upon a time and then had money to build their church on a

clearing under the hills, a dark little church with a tower too big for it and a good peal of bells.

When the eighteenth century was dying and the call of romance and the wild began to come to sophisticated ears, two or three folks discovered that the lonely, barren land had beauty in its sheer, dark hills and the deep combes through which streams flow swift and clear as amber where the sunlight pierces shadowing birch and pine. The discoverers took pains to keep it to themselves.

A nabob bought up the parish and made himself a park and a lake and built a great brown house to the pattern of an Italian palace and called it Tillingmere Manor. He endowed the parson, who instructed him in objects of art and coarser delights, and the result was a Gothic rectory, half a mile above the church, the upkeep of which has bled white all succeeding rectors. With the spoils of many contracts in Napoleon's wars, a civil servant constructed the most fantastic of Regency villas on a bleak hillside, for which he paid through the nose to the nabob's heir, who swiftly lost the money, with much more, at his card table, and the villa of Miramar burgeoned another dome and minaret.

Except for the edifices thus bestowed, the hills and sands of Hurst bore only a tiny village, and, far apart, a few farmsteads and hovels of squatters, when motor-cars came and the war.

These fruits of civilization inspired enterprise even in Hurst, a trifle later but more strenuous than most places have suffered. It was discovered that the sandy flats would furnish exquisite sites for the homes of heroes back to the land they had saved. Along the high-road broke out a rash of squalid habitation, old railway carriages, wooden bungalows, and at last cottages of some substance and comfort. On either side, the land, which had produced nothing but heather and gorse through the ages, became

piebald and hideous in a belt of sullen crops blotched by poultry-runs.

The settlement spread, living hard, and throve, in a sort of mutual cannibalism, upon itself. Further enterprise pressed upon light industry the temptation that land at Hurst was cheap, transport easy, young labour multiplying on the spot, and hopeful, adventurous factories were planted there.

Streams of buses flowed out to the sprawling squalor and extended it. The railway, shaken from its slumbers and electrified, built it a station. You will not easily find so far from a great town such a mess.

Shunned by mankind through all the ages when it was unspoilt, Hurst became a place of resort for townsfolk in its uglification. There is reason in the paradox. The glaring eruption across the flats did not stretch far from the lines of road and railway and power wires. It was a long mile away from the village green and the church, still farther from the glades which cleave the noble mass of the hills, and they have suffered no change since Caryll the nabob bought their grave beauty for himself.

Hikers discovered hill and dale. On each fine week-end they plodded round in pairs, sections and platoons and cars poked up the old pack-horse lanes and picknicked. Noke, the ancestral wheelwright, turned his shed into a garage and Ye Hursten Tea Shoppe. The shack of a beer-house under the ridge, put up for the thirst and unlawful occasions of drovers and other vagabonds on the Devil's Highway, became an inn of ambitions under the command of a pensioned but sanguine naval officer. Still, on most days the upland was in solemn peace and the village slumbered.

Such was Hurst when the church bell rang twice on that June evening.

Nobody in the settlement remembered having heard it

till some time afterwards. Those who then said they had were not believed by Inspector Lucas. He was without desire to believe, for he could make no sense of the ringing. The young men and women who turn out wireless and other gadgets in the factories, the heroes who cultivate the soil and chickens, were never attentive to the claims of the church. Farm and cottage on the uplands were equally deaf. The little village never knew nor cared what parson would be up to next. The Rev. Michael Troove was of a passionate austerity which earned general neglect of his ministrations and distrust.

But some people did hear the double peal and wondered.

The time was something near five, when no bell should ring. On the west terrace of Tillingmere Manor, its owner, David Ludlow, sat with two women, Christabel Biggs and her mother. Mrs. Biggs, dumpy widow of an Australian, who died of wealth made by wool in the war but left it safe from the slump, was the new and bewildered purchaser of an ancient house, the home of Ludlow's boyhood, on the other side of Hurst Knob.

She has been described by Hugh Gower as dumb in a Cockney accent, but his judgment of no fellow creature is to be trusted. Ludlow found no difficulty in entertaining mother and daughter, though his wife was not there to help. Christabel, according to Gower, is a starling: an infinite self-assertion and range and variety of voice.

This comes out of a small brown girl whose hair and eyes are black if anything, and yet not black, for they have a glimmer of red. But then some remark that she has a fragile grace of form—less like a starling than anything in the world.

She chattered curiosity nineteen to the dozen about what Tillingmere had been and Hurst would be, and Mrs. Biggs remonstrated: "Jo, Jo," making the pet name more deplorable by painful vowels, and Ludlow mixed mocking

nonsense with his information and teased her into a sham fight when she discovered it.

"Oh, you're impossible, Mr. Ludlow!" She sprang up. "You never mean anything. And gosh, what a time we've stayed. Mother!"

"Well, dearie," Mrs. Biggs protested. "So sorry to miss your wife, Mr. Ludlow."

"She'll be very sorry," Ludlow answered. "She——"

The first full note of the church bell tolled, the second quavered and shivered away.

Ludlow stood silent listening till the song of larks was the only sound in the windy sunlight. Then with a frown and a smile, "That's quaint," he said.

"Why, what's the matter?" Christabel asked quickly. "You told us Mrs. Ludlow had gone to church."

"Yes, my child. Two hours ago. You don't use church much, do you? The bells aren't rung because a lady's done the flowers."

"And you're so devout. The church couldn't have a service without Mr. Ludlow knowing."

"The church isn't shy, Miss Biggs. It always asks for what it wants."

She looked down. "I'll try and remember," she said demurely.

"Please."

She looked up at him with a glow in her black eyes. "What's biting you?"

Ludlow laughed. "When the church wants to have a service it rings the bell more than twice."

"Oh, the parson's trying a new stunt to see if he can get you," she scoffed.

"I expect that is it." Ludlow declined combat.

"Now, Jo, Jo," said Mrs. Biggs and said good-bye.

When they were gone, Ludlow walked down through the gardens into the park. There he came upon his wife making her way home slowly, a grey figure, limp and bent. She

did not see him till he spoke. "Why, Ann, you have been a long time." He took her arm through his. "You're tired, dear. Has anything gone wrong?"

"No, no." The answer was listless, but she leant upon him and drew close. "Thank you."

"Did you see the parson?"

"Mr. Troove? No." The pale face was lined with a frown of surprise and trouble. "He wasn't there, David." And after a moment she drew herself up and asked, "Why?"

"He has something on, hasn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

"My dear, I don't know Troove's side-lines. But the church bell rang."

Her grey eyes opened wide. "No, dear! There isn't a service in the afternoon—it's in the evening."

"I didn't think there was a service. But the bell was rung."

"When? Not our church bells."

"We don't hear any others, do we? Half an hour ago, one bell rang twice and stopped."

"I didn't hear it."

"That's odd," said Ludlow. "I did, and I was up at the house."

"I didn't, David. I don't understand. And there wasn't anyone in church all the time I was there. I can't understand." She was confused and distressed.

"Never mind, it's nothing," Ludlow consoled her. "Troove trying a new effect, or some young rascal playing the fool." He brought her solicitously home and made her lie down before dinner.

But certain other people took more practical interest.

That afternoon Miss Sarah Milburn, a stalwart young woman, who had fled from a well-paid secretary's desk to grow salads at Hurst, packed her hamper for the nightly London lorry betimes and walked up towards the hills—

a diversion which she allowed herself frugally. She was not alarmed when, emerging from a hollow lane to the slope below the Devil's Highway, she was assaulted by a boisterous Airedale.

"Dingo, you wop," the rebuke came like the crack of a shot, the Airedale collapsed, grinning and wagging, to present the woman to his man, a small man who arrived briskly. "Excuse. We are above ourselves. We've never seen anything like you before." His face was preternaturally solemn. "You're not real, are you, lady?" he went on sadly. "We've been sleeping in the sun."

"The dog is a wise dog," said Sally.

"Oh, lady, be good! Don't encourage us. Not safe."

"I haven't changed much since Monday. He knows me."

"I wouldn't put it past him. An awful dog. He knows a lot. Monday—which was that?"

Sally walked on and the dog looked at his man and followed her. "Perhaps you're right, Dingo." The man went with them. "It was Monday, Miss Milburn. And this is Wednesday. Too bad. I have a perfectly good pug eating its head off just up the hill. That forward hound invites you to a dish o' tea."

"He's a darling. Thank you very much, Commander Cloudesley——"

"No! There shall be no more sea. As you were, lady."

Sally relented into a smile. "I must get back, Tommy."

"To bath the lettuces and put 'em to bed? Give your conscience a stand-easy. Think of me."

"Bad for business."

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary! How does your garden grow?"

She told him without remorse over a mile or more of breezy heather and was still talking frames and cloches

and glasshouses as he turned with her down a lane to the village.

Then the church bell rang. Cloudesley broke step and stood still as the sound died. "What's that for, Sally?" he said softly, his solemn face sharpened to alert curiosity as he looked down through the trees to the brown, silent tower.

"I don't know." Her blue eyes were amused and bewildered. "It's funny. Mr. Troove is queer."

"Padre trying a new code of signals?" Cloudesley listened for more in vain. "Well, he's finished. Come on, lady. Let's look-see." He swung on downhill and the next thing they heard was growling. "Curse that dog. Dingo!" Dingo retreated upon him still growling, accompanied by a flying stone. "Blast you, sir!" Cloudesley called and rounded a turn of the lane and discovered a man with a woman. "Sorry, Miss Carter." He took off his hat. "My rascal meant no harm and wouldn't have done any." He turned to the man, a tall fellow with a lot of wild hair and elaborately shabby clothes, flannel trousers which were dirty and a tweed coat which was frayed. But he had a crimson silk shirt rippling with the wind and excitement. He had an attitude too. Cloudesley grinned at him. "Mr. Gower don't get on with dogs."

"It's all right," the woman answered, looking anxiously from one to the other. She was flushed and out of breath and self-conscious as a schoolgirl.

"All dogs are bullies." Gower spoke from the higher altitudes of the intellect. "I don't encourage them, Cloudesley."

"Your mistake, my lad. You give 'em lots of sport. Accepting the apology, where have you come from?"

Gower scowled at him. "What a funny question," Miss Carter giggled. "We just came over the heath."

"Did you hear the church bell, Fay?" Sally struck in.

"The bell? When? Oh yes, just now," she stammered.

"That's right, miss." Another voice joined the conversation, a mellow country voice, and the squat dark man who spoke dropped down into the lane.

"And what do you know about it, Noke?" Cloudesley asked sharply.

"I was just up along, captain," Noke turned a knowing eye at Gower and Fay Carter. "I heard it clear. Naught but two rings of the Mary bell. And that's a rum go."

"The which?"

"You don't know our bells. The Mary bell it was. That's the tenor, and that ain't never rung alone but for parson when he dies."

"Jemima!" said Cloudesley. "Come on!"

"I was coming," Noke strode after him. "I can't get it at all. Parson's fit as a donkey. And then, sexton 'd toll more nor twice even for he."

They made haste down the lane and Sally's long legs kept up with them. But Gower and Fay Carter did not follow. "Aren't you going too?" she asked. "It'll look so queer if we don't."

"Be at peace," said Gower. "No man will ever think you're queer, Fay." He took her hand and hauled her up out of the lane. "There's the wind on the heath, sister. The snails on the leaf and the bird's on the wing—going to eat him—and God's in His heaven—all's wrong with the world."

"You're horrid," she told him. "I want to go back," but she went on with him.

Sally and Cloudesley and Noke came out of the hollow lane to the scrap of green by which the little brown church rears its massive tower above the thatch of some few scattered cottages. Across the green two small boys fled desperately.

"Here, what's wrong, son?" Noke shouted.

A squeak of an answer came. "Deader lying in church."

Cloudesley ran on and as he came to the porch charged

upon a man hurrying out. "Sorry, sir," he held his staggering victim up. "What's happened here?"

"Eh, it's parson," Noke grunted. "There now, I said there wasn't no tolling for him yet. Who ever rang the Mary bell over 'e so soon, Mr. Troove?"

"Please, please," Troove shook off Cloudesley's hands. "A terrible thing has happened in the church. Mrs. Carson, I'm afraid she's dead. I must go and arrange to have her removed—if you please, Mr. Cloudesley." He thrust by them.

They went on into the gloom of the church. No one was to be seen in the nave or the tiny chancel. Two little transepts made a cross with the nave. One was curtained off as a vestry. At the end of the other, three bell ropes came down from the tower through a dark wooden ceiling. Close by the ropes, a woman lay upon her face, her arms flung wide, one hand by her hat, as if she had torn it off. Through the disorder of her glossy black hair blood was oozing.

Cloudesley stooped to feel for her pulse and turned with his solemnity puckered in a ghost of a grin.

"Oh, Tommy!" Sally gasped.

"Padre's a bit swift, my lass," he said. "She's not dead yet." He parted the tumbled black hair from a long wound. "But she's stopped something hard. Where's the nearest phone—padre barred? The post office. Off you go, Noke! Doctor and police. Doctor first. Make 'em jump to it. I'll stand by. You run away home, lady."

"Says you," said Sally as Noke lumbered off. "Tommy, can't we do something for her?"

"Nix. Don't you move her."

"I'll get some water and things."

"All right. Play around."

She ran out and Cloudesley crossed to the other transept and pulled back the curtains. Nothing was to be seen but surplices hanging on the wall, a praying-desk and an oak

chest. He went to the chest and opened it. It held only vestments. He paced about the little church looking into every corner, and at last came to the altar, stared for a moment at its fresh flowers, lifted the altar-cloth to peer into the darkness underneath. But that was empty.

CHAPTER II

AT PRAYER

"GHASTLY MESS, ISN'T it?" said the chief constable of Mershire as he drove Mr. Fortune through the rattling traffic of the flats of Hurst.

"Oh no. No." Dreamily benign, Reggie watched the rash of mean houses and sheds slide by. "Not if life's a boon. Lots of life here. Which there never was till yesterday. You're so superior, Lacy. I like the human race. I like its silly face. Makes me feel at home."

Lacy decided that this was a joke and laughed. "Plenty of silly faces here since Ludlow started his infernal development. It's an odd thing this modern building out in the country always attracts a mob of freaks."

"My dear chap!" Reggie purred sympathy. "Too bad. Only one happy world for policemen. World without people. However. Had any trouble on your blasted heath before?"

"The deuce of a lot of small cases. They're an ill-conditioned, undisciplined crowd. We've never had any serious crime till now."

"But you put the lady's broken head down to one of the naughty settlers?"

"No, I don't. I have no evidence. This is the background. When you have a lot of queer animals ranging about, anything may happen. But Mrs. Carson's not the sort of woman to get across them—or know any of 'em."

"Fair mind, your mind," Reggie purred. "What sort is she?"

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"She's a widow, thirty-five or so, an attractive woman, devilish well off, lives very quietly. She only came here after her husband died. He was something in the city. She took a fine house up in the hills that had been empty for years, rather off the map. All this district is. Nobody near except the parson. Her place is well away from the mess down here, like Ludlow's. I'll say that for him, he hasn't let his cursed development spoil the upland. Well, you'll see."

The car turned between bus and lorry into a by-road, and as the hoot of a factory, signalling noon, died away with the rumble of a train, left the last mushroom growth of the flats behind and entered a lonely silence of sunlit gorse and grey heather, unbounded on either side, rising to shadows of woodland and the blue rampart of hills, unscarred by any trace that human life had ever turned the sand.

"Rather dramatic, aren't you?" Reggie murmured. "The teemin' noisy present and the silent empty past in one scene."

Lacy thought that out and said: "Just so, pleasant country, shame to spoil it. It's worth next to nothing, of course. I suppose you can't wonder Ludlow started development."

"You don't like the man Ludlow?" Reggie enquired.

"I didn't mean that at all. Everybody likes him. The new school of land-owner, you know, runs his estate on business lines. These things have to be. Ludlow himself is one of the best. Now there, the square tower poking up behind the trees, that's the church where Mrs. Carson was knocked out. Her house is half a mile or more away, up on that hillside." Round a signpost inscribed "To Miramar House Only. Private", he swung the car into a drive which climbed between exotic shrubs to steps of prim gardening and a low white villa, all curves, glittering in many convex windows below, bright green above in a cluster of bulbous domes.

"Oh my hat!" Reggie sighed. "The suburban oriental. Is your Mrs. Carson like that?"

"Not at all," Lacy was shocked. "She didn't build it. It's a George IV house. It's considered a very fine place. It fetched a big price, I can tell you."

"Well, well. These things have to be. As you were sayin'. Now let's see the owner."

Two cars stood at the door. They went in, they were taken to a room pink of carpet and wall and Reggie was introduced to Dr. Ranford and Inspector Lucas.

Ranford, a brisk important young fellow, condescended to say that he would be glad of Mr. Fortune's opinion. Reggie followed him upstairs.

The curtains were drawn in Mrs. Carson's bedroom and made a golden twilight. A screen shadowed her bed. "Now, this is Mr. Fortune come to help me," Ranford announced.

"More light, nurse," Reggie murmured. The screen was moved, a curtain pulled back.

Mrs. Carson shut her eyes and opened them again to look at him as he bent over her. "So good of you," she said faintly.

Her head was swathed in a bandage. Her full cheeks were pale, her eyes dull, her mouth a little open and twitching, but even so he could see that she might be of a vigorous beauty.

Ranford unwound the bandage and took off the dressings from a swollen wound which stretched from her brow through her black hair. She stirred and made a sound of pain.

"I shan't hurt you," said Reggie, and his hands touched her very lightly, but he spent a long time examining the wound. . . . "That's doing quite well, Mrs. Carson," he told her. "It shouldn't give you much more trouble now. Have you had any other pain?"

"Oh, thank you. No. Just throbbing ache."

Reggie looked a question at Ranford. "Her left arm is bruised," Ranford answered. "No other injury."

Reggie inspected the bruise. "I see. Yes."

The wound was dressed again and Ranford and he went out. "Well. Makin' a good recovery. Quite fit to tell us how she was hurt. Any ideas?"

"I agree that she can be questioned now, Mr. Fortune. I'm not at all sure that she has any clear recollection. She's been quite incoherent about what happened. That is not unusual in cases of concussion."

"I have noticed it," Reggie sighed.

"My own opinion is that the injury was inflicted by a heavy blow from some blunt instrument."

"Yes. As usual. Quite heavy. Quite blunt. On the head. On the arm—fall or glancing blow. Anything else? Did you see her clothes?"

"I saw her as she was found. Her hat was off and crumpled. Her dress was dusty from the floor, but not torn, no signs of a struggle."

"All right. Bring our policemen up, will you? I'll tell her." Reggie went back to the bedroom. "Just a minute, nurse," he waved her out. "Now, Mrs. Carson, Dr. Ranford will soon have you well again. Major Lacy's called, askin' to see you, you know him, don't you? The chief constable. Wants to have a talk with you. Can't have you hurt like this and not do anything about it. Here we are."

Lacy and his inspector came in with Ranford.

"Oh, Major Lacy!" she cried. "Nobody told me. I'm not fit to be seen."

"My dear lady, I'm so glad to see you better." Lacy bowed and brought a chair to the bedside. "I've been very anxious. A shocking affair. Now, I won't tire you. I just want you to give me your account of it."

She shuddered. "It's like a ghastly dream. I don't know what is real and what isn't. When was it? I was going to

church. I did go. I often go in the afternoon. It's so peaceful there."

Behind the chief constable, Inspector Lucas wrote in his notebook and asked: "What time did you go, Mrs. Carson?"

"Oh, five o'clock, I suppose, perhaps. I wasn't thinking about the time."

"Did you see anyone?"

She frowned. "No, I don't think so, I'm not sure. I believe there was someone."

"Where? In the church?"

"Yes. But I didn't really see. It's like this. I was in the church. I was in the tower transept. I like it best. In the old wall-painting there, there's a Mother and Child. It's so peaceful. Well, I was—I was praying, and I heard someone talk and move. It was in the other transept, where the vestry is. I didn't hear anything clear. I didn't want to, I was at prayer, you see. And then there was someone close behind me—oh, I felt them there—and then—I don't know—it's just pain and falling, falling, as you fall in a dream." She put her hand to her head and her eyes closed.

"You didn't see who it was?"

"No."

"Did you think there was more than one person?" Reggie enquired.

"I'm not sure. There was somebody. But yes, I'm sure I heard talking. That must be more than one, mustn't it?"

"It seems likely. Do you remember anything about the noises? Man or woman, for instance."

"I don't know. I didn't listen. I didn't want to hear. It just disturbed me, you see."

"Oh yes. Yes," Reggie murmured, and the chief constable asserted himself.

"Now, Mrs. Carson, have you any idea who it could have been? . . . Who was likely to be there? . . . Who would assault you?"

She had answered each question with a bewildered "No, no," her voice trembled as she went on: "I can't understand. It doesn't seem real. Nobody would."

"I'm very sorry to distress you," said Lacy. "I have only one more question. You remember pain and falling. Do you remember hearing the church bell ring?"

"No," her eyes opened wide in a puzzled stare. "The bells wouldn't be ringing then. Wait, I'm not sure. It's all so blurred, like a dream when you wake. I think there was a bell somewhere in it. Oh, I don't know."

"Thank you. I won't trouble you any more." Lacy rose. "You've been very brave and patient."

"Oh yes, yes," Reggie agreed. "Good-bye, Mrs. Carson. You're in excellent hands."

CHAPTER III

THE DEAD BAT

IN THE PINK room downstairs, Inspector Lucas set chairs for a conference and Reggie watched him with pathetic dismay.

"Now, Mr. Fortune," the chief constable took his seat. "May I have your opinion?"

"My dear chap!" Reggie sighed. "Lady's evidence quite consistent with the medical evidence. Injury may have been caused by heavy blow from blunt instrument. As stated by Dr. Ranford. Blow may have been struck from behind and above while she was kneelin' in prayer, or risin' from her knees. As stated by the lady. About the bell. No medical evidence. No clear evidence from the lady. Any evidence it did ring at the time of the assault?"

"Not too good, sir," Lucas answered. "Commander Cloudesley, he says it rang twice about five and he got to the church within fifteen minutes and found her unconscious. She says she went there about five, but she was very vague though, and you can't tell how long she was praying there before she was hit."

"As you say. Curious and interestin', the bell."

"It's absolutely mysterious," Lacy frowned.

"I don't think so, major," Ranford spoke with the complacency of the superior mind. "Mr. Fortune doesn't know the conditions. The bell ropes hang down into that transept where Mrs. Carson was at prayer. It would be quite natural for her to grasp a rope to save herself as she was falling. That would produce the two rings which

were heard, one clear from her weight on the rope, the other faint from the backswing of the bell."

Reggie gazed at him with wide, solemn eyes and murmured: "I did not know all that. As you say. Not bad, Ranford."

"It does give us an explanation," said Lacy. "And what about the weapon, doctor, what would you say was used?"

"I can tell you that it was a heavy, blunt instrument," Ranford answered.

"Always is, isn't it?" Reggie sighed, and his round face was plaintive with the melancholy of an injured child. "And in this case?"

"I should suggest some tool, such as a large spanner," Ranford instructed him.

"Oh yes. From the kit of a car," Reggie mumbled. "I see." He turned to Lacy and in a voice of anguish he announced: "I want my lunch."

"By Jove, it is getting late," said Lacy. He gave Ranford thanks and compliments and Ranford was sorry he could not ask them home, but he had urgent cases; if he could be of any service, Major Lacy could command him. He took his important departure.

Lacy, with a twinkle in his discreet eye, remarked to Reggie: "You don't think much of Dr. Ranford?"

"Yes, I do. Quite a lot. If not as much as he does. Quite bright. Quite alarmin'. Could there be lunch? Soon? Near?"

"We might run up to Cloudesley's place," said Lacy. "Come along," and as they drove off; "What is in your mind, Mr. Fortune?" he asked.

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! The mind is futile. All a wonder and a wild desire, fumblin' with an awful mess. Cloudesley. That's the naval officer who found the lady? Why should he give us lunch?"

"He keeps a pub," said Lacy. "He's an odd fish. Not

quite the thing, you know. But I'm told his pub does you well enough."

Reggie turned a reproachful gaze from Lacy to the landscape. They had climbed high. The bluff crest of Hurst Knob was near. They turned away from the green track which led up to it and just under the ridge of the hills came upon a house, brown in two colours of sandstone, old and new, which declared itself the Knob Inn.

The old low part was respectfully preserved, but made a comic contrast with the large dignity of the new structure, a building of grave and comfortable harmonies. All around spread a garden, demurely old-fashioned.

At the door Cloudesley lounged, his Airedale panting beside him. "Hullo, major," he greeted Lacy. "What's the best with you?" His alert eyes took in Reggie, who was contemplating the inn with dreamy amusement. "Does my little place get you that way, sir? It's the tail wagging the dog. The old bit will cheek the new big stuff."

"I like it," said Reggie.

"Thank you. Then you'll like the garden too. Silver bells and cockle shells and columbines all in a row. As mother loved 'em. Bunyard!" he fired the name through the door. "Lunch in the garden, gentlemen," he gave them no chance to object.

He brought them to a table in the shade of a trellis of honeysuckle and a large man in a white jacket padded up and from out of his bulk produced with the flourish of a conjuring trick two cards.

Reggie studied them and raised wistful eyes to Cloudesley's solemnity. "Very pretty lunch. With your white Corton."

"You're a judge, sir. And a glass of Tio Pepe first. While I show your wine the ice." Cloudesley vanished with his man.

Reggie leaned back and contemplated the dancing columbines and white Canterbury bells. "Oh, major!" he sighed. "Is it too good to be true? Why did you say he wasn't quite the thing?"

"I dare say I'm out of date," said Lacy. "I don't care for a naval officer doing this head-waiter stuff."

"My dear chap! If he does it well!"

"The food 'll be all right, sir," Inspector Lucas assured him with gusto. "But there's no denying Commander Cloudesley is a queer customer."

Bunyard deposited the sherry and faded out again.

"Now, Mr. Fortune," said Lacy. "What was it in Dr. Ranford's explanation that put you off?"

"Oh no. No. Not now," Reggie protested and sipped his sherry. "Quite good, this. Oh, my hat!" he purred. "If all is thus—what a place to find! On the top of the down and over me June's high blue and the bracken bright in the heather brown—sittin' in a Kate Greenaway garden——"

Crab salad came, and with it Cloudesley brought the white burgundy, waited till blissful approval came, and slid away, and while they ate lamb cutlets and raspberry tart, Reggie purled a mellow accompaniment praising the joys of the simple life.

He had emptied the cream-jug into his second cup of coffee before he stopped talking and embraced the chief constable and the inspector with genially confidential eyes through some moments. Then he murmured: "It didn't. Not so, but otherwise."

The inspector's mouth came open. "I beg your pardon?" said the chief constable with some asperity.

"My dear major! Reply to your official enquiry. Dr. Ranford's explanation of the crime did not put me off. Very interestin' explanation. Explains everything. Except who and why. I should take it as the basis of enquiry. With the lady's explanation. Which agrees nicely. And points out at why and who."

Lacy thought it over at length, then asked another question. "You are satisfied that she was assaulted as Ranford said—and as she said?"

"I wouldn't say satisfied," Reggie drawled. "No objection, speakin' medically. No alternative, on the other evidence. Case for the police—Mrs. Carson was knocked on the head with something heavy, by someone who was talkin' in the vestry, for fear she'd heard too much of the doings there."

Lacy's shrewd, prim reserve showed displeasure. "You infer that something improper was going on?"

"Oh yes," said Reggie cheerfully. "Only possible inference from the lady's account of things. Always believe evidence. Till I can't."

"Mrs. Carson didn't infer it."

"No. She didn't. She left it to us. Our job."

"I find it hard to believe that anyone would choose the church vestry for misconduct."

"Not pretty, no. However. What did happen wasn't pretty."

"Who would go to the church for such a purpose?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Reggie murmured.

Lacy made a sound of disgust.

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Keep calm. Case for research. There are suggestions. In the statement of the man Cloudesley. When the bell rang, when he went down to the church to see what was up, he met a fellow with a girl, what about them?"

"Ah!" Inspector Lucas licked his lips and looked sideways at his chief. "That's what I've been asking, Mr. Fortune. The fellow, Hugh Gower, by name, he's always up to some mischief. He don't know how to behave decent. He's up against everybody who has any position. And a devil with the girls."

"The local black sheep. He would fill the bill. Any criminal record?"

"Lor', no, sir, he's not that kind. He has private means. He's a gentleman."

"I see," Reggie smiled. "Friend of Mrs. Carson's?"

"Not him. She wouldn't know a Bolshy like Gower."

"Bein' a real lady," Reggie murmured. "You may be right. Another suggestion by the useful man Cloudesley. When he got to the church, he saw the rector coming out. Though Mrs. Carson saw nobody inside. Rector's own statement, he only went to the church when he heard the bell ring. Same like Cloudesley. However. Have you tried to verify that?"

"Good God!" Lacy was shocked. "The rector—Troove—you don't suggest—it's preposterous, Mr. Fortune. The man's a saintly ascetic."

"That kind?" Reggie's eyelids drooped. "Well, well. You never know, you know. And something did happen and somebody was there—according to Mrs. Carson."

Lacy frowned. Lacy spoke in a tone of command. "If I know anything of men, Troove's the last man to suspect."

"I quite agree with that, sir," said Lucas like a good subordinate. "But I did think right to try and confirm when Mr. Troove went to church. There's nobody at all saw him go. Some kids looked in after the bell rang and saw Mrs. Carson lying like dead and him with her. Before that, no one was seen near the church except Mrs. Ludlow, who goes regular to do the altar flowers. I've talked to her and she says nobody was in the church when she was, but she's hopeless about times. She's a very vague lady."

"Mrs. Ludlow?" Reggie opened his eyes. "New character. Who is she?"

"Her family have owned the whole place for two hundred years," said Lacy impatiently. "Besides all this, Mr. Fortune—if it had been Troove talking in the vestry, Mrs. Carson would have recognised his voice. It's quite clear she didn't."

"Yes. You have a point, major. She said she didn't know the vestry voices. But she was definite there were voices. The one thing she was definite about. I wonder."

Reggie lit a cigar, drank up his coffee and lay back and gazed through smoke at the trellis of honeysuckle.

Cloudesley came round it and came to the table. "A good lunch, gentlemen?"

"Wonderful," Reggie answered. "Did I see you had some Marc? And won't you——"

"Thanks very much." Cloudesley sped away and returned with glasses and two bottles. "Brandy for you, major, I think. Mr. Fortune's right, though. Marc's the stuff to follow burgundy."

"Not a rule. Simple, severe taste, my taste," Reggie purred. "You know me, commander?"

"Cloudesley, please sir. I've sold out of the sea. Everybody's met Mr. Fortune in the papers."

"As you say. More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows. You found Mrs. Carson, didn't you? Any ideas?"

"It has me beat, sir," said Cloudesley and lifted his glass. "Here's hoping."

"I am. Yes. Thanks." Reggie drank. "Well, well. On with the dance. Show me this church, major."

Cloudesley snapped his fingers, Bunyard brought the bill.

"Very useful man, the man Cloudesley," said Reggie as they drove away. "Never in the way, never out of the way."

"You don't trust him. That's what I feel," said Lacy heartily.

"Trust! Oh, major! Trust nobody. So far. Hence I go to church."

"I can't imagine how that will help us."

"Nor can I," Reggie murmured. "The mind is blank. But hopeful."

"What do you hope for?"

"My dear major! Hope to annoy somebody. Our urgent duty. But wholly without prejudice."

Lacy instructed him angrily that it was two days since the attack on the woman, that Cloudesley said he searched the church through and through when he found her and saw nobody, no weapon, that Lucas searched again as soon as he arrived and couldn't see anything suspicious, it was impossible, whether Cloudesley lied or not, there would be a scrap of a clue left.

"Shouldn't be. No," Reggie mumbled, and they drove up to the church. "Who was that?" he asked as they got out of the car.

"I didn't see anyone," Lacy snapped.

Lucas joined them. "That was Gower, Mr. Fortune, hanging about as if he was on the watch."

"Well, well. A fearful fellow." Reggie smiled and stood still and contemplated the church. "Topheavy little place. Too much tower. One door only?"

"That's right, sir." Lucas strode ahead and opened it and they went into the gloom and he led them to the tower transept. "Now here we are. Mrs. Carson was lying on her face just by the bell ropes."

"Oh yes." Reggie looked round. The tiny transept was without pews, but some rush chairs stood in it. On the eastern wall could be made out blurred figures of stiff mediæval painting. "Yes. Virgin and Child. As stated. Before whom Mrs. Carson was in prayer." He looked long at them. "Wistful," he said, and turned to contemplate the chairs and the three bell ropes and his round face was wistful too. "It could be," he murmured. "Where's the vestry? Over there." Crossing to the other transept he parted the curtains and went in.

"No comforts to encourage conversation," he glanced at the praying-desk. "Would that hear confessions?" He opened the vestment chest and turned back. "Oh!" With a quick movement he swept the folds of the curtain away from the row of surplices on the western wall. "There is another door, inspector," he complained, as a low arch

over black worm-eaten oak was revealed, and he turned the rusty handle and pushed the door back into darkness.

"That's nothing," Lucas told him. "That only goes down to the old crypt."

But Reggie vanished through the doorway, flashing a torch before him. The light showed a short flight of steps which led down to a chamber hewn in rough, round curves out of the sandstone of the hill. At the eastern end an apse was built up for an altar which lay in crumbling ruin. The air was heavy with earthy odours. His torch found opposite the altar a stone coffin. He moved the planks which covered it and bent over a confusion of damp bones.

The chief constable and the inspector came down into the crypt and saw the torchlight falling on a bone which he held in his hand.

"What is it, Mr. Fortune?" Lacy exclaimed. "My God, sir, do you think that was the weapon?"

Reggie dandled the bone. "Heavy, blunt instrument, the human thigh-bone," he smiled awry. "As specified by Dr. Ranford."

"Ghastly!" Lacy muttered.

"Rather primitive. Yes. Also not now adequate. Too old. Too brittle. However. No better weapon here. Try again, major." Lacy gasped and choked. Reggie laid the bone in the coffin and covered it and went up into the church again, went back to the tower transept.

There he stood still, gazing from the floor to the bell ropes and up to the black wooden ceiling and the gap in it through which they came down.

Lacy exploded. "I don't understand you, you said try again, what are you trying?"

"Everything," Reggie mumbled. He pulled at the bell ropes one by one, producing no sound. "Not easy to ring. Some force required." Again he gazed up at the hole in the ceiling, turned away and made haste out.

Lacy and Lucas followed, condemning him to each other. They saw him crossing the churchyard from the porch towards the tower, he turned its corner and vanished. Then they heard his voice in plaintive protest. "Oh, I say! Inspector! Yet another door!"

"Well, I know." Lucas joined him. "That don't go into the church."

At its farther corner the tower bulged into a turret of less than its own height. A narrow door in that opened upon winding stairs. Reggie climbed them and came into a low dim chamber. "You see, the stairs go on up to the bells," Lucas explained. "This here was the priest's room in the old times, they say, but it's never used now. You can see that."

The only light in the room came from the slots of two lancet windows, from the broad hole in the floor through which the bell ropes came up, and the gap in the beams above by which they reached the bells.

Reggie looked down into the transept below and wandered about.

"Mind how you go or you'll knock your head," Lucas warned him. "Those old beams come lower than what you think."

"Quite low. Yes," Reggie murmured. "I had noticed it. Not much used, no. Only by bats." He took out his torch again and flashed its light on bats hanging upside down from the beams in sleep.

The chief constable made an impatient noise.

"Did you say bats in the belfry, major?" Reggie gave him a twist of a smile. "Well, well," he turned his torch to the floor. "Dirt of ages. Stand fast. Rather messed about here—and there—by the yawnin' gulf to the transept—and—my only aunt!" He stooped, he picked up something from the dirt.

"What is it?" Lacy came to look.

"One—dead—bat," Reggie drawled. "*Plecotus auritus*,

by name. A long-eared bat. Fond of church towers, his family. This gentleman died recently. By violence. Poor fellow. Blow of some blunt instrument. As our Dr. Ranford would say. Badly smashed. Previous to death, he had been in contact with hair. Human black hair." He looked up at Lacy with a slow, benign smile. "There you are, major. Quite clear now."

"I don't understand you," Lacy drew back. "I don't follow at all. Are you serious, Mr. Fortune?"

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Serious as death—and the wrath to come. This case is—now. Can't believe the old evidence any more. Can't believe Mrs. Carson. She was lying good and hard. It didn't happen like she said. None of it. Look at this place. Look at the dead bat."

"I can't see the significance. I don't know what you mean to imply."

"Oh, major!" Reggie sighed. "Somebody's been here just lately. Somebody killed the bat. Somebody who left black hair on it. Woman's black hair. What did happen is obvious. Mrs. Carson came up to this place to eavesdrop on people in the church. Hopin' for that conversation which she said she didn't listen to. Good place for a spy. Through that hole she could hear, she could even see and she'd never be seen. But bats sleep on the beams and the beams are low, as the inspector was sayin'. She got a bat tangled in her hair, she was scared, she tore it out and smashed it, she stumbled away and fell down through the hole there, catching at a bell rope to save herself. Takes a strong pull to ring one of these bells, as we found. Her weight did it, one clear ring and a little one, as reported. She couldn't hold on, she crashed on the transept floor. That was the heavy, blunt instrument which broke her head."

Lacy's mind laboured through a long silence. "You are very ingenious, Mr. Fortune," he said slowly. "I

—really, I find it impossible to form any opinion. This is an extraordinarily clever interpretation. But, after all, it's only interpretation. There's nothing in the nature of proof."

"Nothing to base a charge on. No. Not yet."

"Not yet?" Lacy exclaimed. "But no charge can be made on your theory. No crime has been committed. It was purely an accident."

"An accident. Yes. Not so pure."

"You represent her as an unpleasant woman looking for scandal. I am not to accept that. But if she were, it's not a police matter."

"Not yet. No," Reggie repeated.

"Do you suggest that some crime was being planned here in the church?"

"Planned?" Reggie murmured. "I didn't say that. What was she spyin' for? Who was she spyin' on? Interestin' questions."

"The only person we are certain was in the church that afternoon was Mrs. Ludlow," said Lacy angrily. "She is beyond any suspicion."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "Try again. I'll keep the bat, major." He turned and went down the winding stair.

"What do you suggest we should try?" Lacy demanded as they came out into the light. "You have really given me nothing but guesswork, and the more I think of it the more improbable I find it."

"My poor major!" Reggie sighed.

"I beg your pardon." Lacy was angry. "You haven't considered what you said, Mr. Fortune. A bat's fur might catch up a scrap of female hair anywhere. If this bat was killed here, as you suppose, anyone may have killed it at any time. I should be ridiculous, I should be most irregular, if I put your strange theory to Mrs. Carson and examined her upon it."

"And futile," Reggie mumbled. "Don't want you to put it to her." He surveyed Lacy's wrath with closing eyes. "Wonder whether she suggested to our Dr. Ranford she was hit by a tool from a car—or has Ranford suggested it to her. But don't ask 'em. Only bear it in mind."

"You suspect Dr. Ranford?"

"Oh no. No. Innocent, important youth. But the tool stuff was interestin'. Good-bye."

"Why, but I'm driving you back to the station," Lacy protested.

"I think not," Reggie murmured. "I'd like to stay at the man Cloudesley's pub for a bit. Curious case, major." He wandered away and the chief constable and the inspector told each other what they thought of him.

Where the road to the inn was between high banks he stopped and lit a pipe as a mop of yellow hair rose out of the heath above. It belonged to a man in dingy shorts and a bright green shirt. A thin woman carrying a basket of lilies came by on the other side. She stooped, she moved wearily. Reggie saw her face wan in the sunlight. The man turned and vanished.

"The wicked Gower," Reggie said to himself. "Goin' off watch. Or goin' after her. And she—the Mrs. Ludlow who is above suspicion? Coming to do the flowers again."

CHAPTER IV

TEA FOR TWO

THERE WERE SEVERAL cars before the Knob Inn. From the garden and the lounge came a cheerful noise. But Reggie stood a moment in its empty hall before the plump Bunyard rolled up. "Sir? Tea, sir? Alone, sir?"

"Mr. Cloudesley," said Reggie and with a gap-toothed grin Bunyard made off to the interior.

After some moments more Cloudesley arrived with an apology for putting in a bit of shut-eye, but his eyes were bright. Reggie asked if there was a room with a bath in the vicinity. "One of the best, sir. To-night? Will you be alone?"

"Yes, I wasn't bringin' my wife."

Cloudesley blinked and said, "Too bad. I hope you will."

"Just want to 'phone for my car and kit."

Cloudesley shut him into a little office with the telephone and when he came out showed him a demure room which looked all chintz and smelt of lavender and looked westward across the hills. "This is good," Reggie purred. "Let's have some tea, Cloudesley. China tea for me, and buttered toast."

"Thanks very much," Cloudesley took this as a natural and expected invitation. "In a shake." He went out but did not come back till he brought a waiter and a tray. Having put Reggie in an easy chair before a window, with the tea-table, he perched on the window-seat and said briskly:

"I hope you liked the church, sir?"

"Oh yes. Quaint little place. Do you use it much?"

"I'm on duty Christmas and Easter. And that's more than most."

"Rector not popular?"

"The padre's very stern. It don't go these days."

"Not even with the women?"

Cloudesley's solemnity became excessively respectful. "You mean they always like being chastened. I wouldn't contradict your experience, sir. But I haven't been so lucky. Anyway, our padre has no use for the female."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "That can be attractive. Haven't you noticed? Some devout ladies here. Mrs. Carson."

It was a moment before Cloudesley answered. "You have me beat," he said slowly. "What Mrs. Carson was doing in the church, I don't know. But if you think she went for devotions, well, you're telling me."

"Do you know her much?"

"Help!" Cloudesley grinned. "I'm a poor man. Mrs. Carson has bought the earth."

"Like that. Well, well. There were other ladies about."

"I was with a lady myself."

"Oh yes. Miss Milburn. But you weren't being devout. Give one another an alibi on that."

"Thanks so much."

"You met another lady—with a man Gower. Rather fluffy about hearing the bell ring, wasn't she?"

"I had to report that. But there's a discount. Fay Carter is fluffy. I like the girl, everybody likes her, she's so darned pretty and helpless."

"Who is she?"

"The daughter of Scott Carter, bloke who runs the wireless factory. He's not a bad chap, as smart as they're made, but quite human. He's always on the job, though, and the girl has no mother. Fay plays around too much."

"With the man Gower? Not so good?"

Cloudesley made a face of contempt. "Gower's our prize crank. Gentleman Bolshy, full o' wind. He lives the simple life in an old cottage faked up with the latest gadgets and writes hymns of hate for the highbrows, rousing the bright lads of the factories to bloody revolution in his spare time. They had quite a rag at the wireless works the other day—stay-in strike and sang naughty songs round old man Carter."

"Well, well. Yet Miss Carter consorts with Mr. Gower."

"I didn't know that. Discount again. He's not the only one. I thought, myself, Fay's man these days was Davis, her father's young partner, the technical brains of the show."

"Oh. Deeper and deeper yet. Gower cuttin' out another fellow with the fluffy Miss Carter. Just when Mrs. Carson was knocked out."

"Do you make sense of that, sir?"

"No. Did you think I should? But you're very interesting. 'The world is so full of a number of things I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.' One more lady. Mrs. Ludlow went to the church that busy afternoon."

"You're telling me," said Cloudesley.

"But she often goes," Reggie murmured. "She is a devout woman."

"Yes, sir, she is," Cloudesley's tone was a rebuke. "I don't know what you want, but you won't find anyone with a word to say against Mrs. Ludlow."

"My dear chap!" Reggie purred. "And Ludlow?"

"You're on the wrong number, Mr. Fortune. Try comrade Gower and company, you'll hear plenty against him. But if you ask me, Ludlow's a white man."

Reggie lit his pipe. "Well, well. Mrs. Ludlow honoured by all. Ludlow has his enemies. The man Gower can't abide the naughty rich land-owner. Tell me more. Mrs. Ludlow happy with Mr. Ludlow?"

"If you've heard anything else," Cloudesley was coldly incisive, "I should say you've struck a dirty dog."

"I hadn't. Just wonderin'. No child, is there?"

"There's not." The maze of wrinkles about Cloudesley's eyes puckered in a steady stare. "What about it?"

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "I was askin' you."

"Well, I'm no matrimonial expert, but I make the Ludlows a fairy-tale couple. They've known each other since they were kids. Ludlow was her brother's best pal. The Carylls—Mrs. Ludlow's a Caryll—they've had Tillingmere Manor and all the land here for donkey's years. The Ludlows were squires at Whitfold, just beyond the Knob. Ludlow and John Caryll, Mrs. Ludlow's brother, went from school to the war in the same battalion. Caryll was shot down in No Man's Land on a raid and Ludlow went over the top and brought him in. There's a line on Ludlow for you. Well, that finished the war for John Caryll. Ludlow saw it through. Afterwards, both estates were in the soup, like most. The old folks threw in their hands and conked out. John Caryll was a wreck, he didn't last long. Ludlow came home, married his girl and took hold of things. A job o' work! Two bankrupt estates, off the map, and the land not worth a bob an acre. Have you seen what Ludlow's made of it?"

"I have, yes," Reggie sighed.

Cloudesley became more solemn than ever and spoke with a haw-haw accent. "Outrageous, sir. The man's planted a slum on the countryside. Week-enders, small holders and factories, begad. Swamped the place with the riff-raff of the towns. The county is shocked stiff, sir. Ask Major Lacy."

"I'm askin' you," Reggie murmured. "You said before Ludlow had his enemies. The highbrow man, Gower. Now the old county people. Quite different. Anybody in particular?"

"Lord, no, just a general buzz; it's awful, it's not done."

"Mrs. Carson?" Reggie asked. "Has she buzzed against Ludlow?"

"I don't know. She's not one of the county crowd. New money."

"Well, well." Reggie stood up. "Why was she knocked on the head, Cloudesley?"

"I told you, sir, it has me beat." Cloudesley's eyes met his in a steady, keen gaze. "Did you get nothing out of the church?"

"I wouldn't say that. No." Reggie came to the window and gazed across the garden at steep slopes of heather rising to the bluff crest of Hurst Knob. A cloak of woodland, dark shadows of pine, waving veils of birch hid the church and the flat land below. "Ludlow's horrid development hasn't spoilt your view," he drawled. "Hasn't spoilt Mrs. Ludlow's, what? Or Mrs. Carson's?"

"It's spoilt nothing," said Cloudesley sharply.

"You think not? Has he done well out of it?"

"I should say so! A great game. Pots of money making."

"And not a bad life for the makers down on the blasted heath. In spite of the mess."

"That's the way I see it, Mr. Fortune." Cloudesley's solemnity relaxed to beaming approval.

"Yes. All is best though we oft doubt—and very interestin'. What time dinner?"

"Seven-thirty onwards. Did you think of staying more than one night, sir?"

Reggie surveyed him dreamily. "Hadn't thought of staying at all. But I might now."

"You flatter me," Cloudesley grinned. "I hope you're right, Mr. Fortune," and he departed.

In discussions of the case after he finished it, Reggie always maintains that his decision to stay was compelled by the symptoms but included no opinion of their

cause, no theory of what would follow them. As he could only infer some obscure disease in the state of Hurst he had to watch the patient with a mind empty of any expectation. The crime which did immediately happen, he protests mournfully, was a horrid surprise, he had not grasped the case as a whole, his mind lacked confidence in itself. He should have been bolder. He had all the evidence for complete diagnosis.

It is nevertheless true that if he had not stayed on at the Knob Inn there never would have been such an end to the case as he made—for good or evil.

CHAPTER V

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

BENIGN AND LANGUID from a long bath, Reggie came down to the garden and basked in the glow of the westering sun. After a while he held up a finger to a white coat by the dining-room window. "Sir?" Bunyard rolled out. "Cocktail, sir?"

"No, sherry. Dry sherry. What are those people doin' up there?" Reggie pointed to the crest of Hurst Knob. It bore a mound on which moving men stood out against the sunlight, towards which a waggon crawled.

"Last load for the bonfire, sir. This 'ere night being Midsummer Eve. They always put up a bonfire for it on the Knob. Old country custom, sir. They're uncommon keen on it down here, make a reg'lar big do. Dry sherry, sir? Yes, sir."

Reggie sank into drowsy meditation. Queer place, this Hurst place, utter old and newly new in a dog-fight. Well, not so queer it kept the old fires burning. Plant out modern stuff in the country, the moderns often go all ancient—morris dancing, folk songs, May Day games, Christmas plays—back to the pit from which they were digged—keener than if they'd never got out.

Midsummer Eve—St. John's Eve—fires to the sun god—we've been out in the woods all night a-conjuring summer in—jump through the fire—get the magic to give you a lover—that sort of thing. Yes, go very well to jazz. The thing which was, it is that which shall be. And more so. . . .

He dozed till Bunyard's gong called him to dinner.

The sun was down behind the Knob, a tawny light suffused the summit and the slopes were shadowed and the clefts in them dark gulfs when he sat down in the garden again with a pipe. Something of a crowd had come upon the inn. People from cars filled the dining-room and the lounge. The bar was noisy with hikers and young folks of Hurst. Tables set in the garden received a quieter overflow of couples.

Reggie's dreaming eyes were attracted by a girl more than common pretty in the style of an old-fashioned doll. She looked shy and helpless, she had nothing to say to the man beside her but with her eyes. Someone gave her a "Good evening, Miss Carter", and she blushed.

The man with her called her Fay and Reggie's interest became less vague. But the man was not Gower. A very different creature, small, neat, with something of a Puritan earnestness. Reggie brought out of his memory Cloudesley's opinion that Fay's man these days was Davis, her father's partner, technical brains of the wireless factory. It might be. The little fellow wanted to be her man. Did she want him? Not so clear.

On the tracks up to the Knob strings of people appeared. Fay and her man finished a modest meal and departed. When they were out of the garden she took his arm, she drew close to him. Reggie strolled after them. But they did not make for the Knob, they took a narrow path going down across the heather into the steep cleft which divided the rounded eastern buttress of the Knob from the main range of the hills.

Darker twilight closed upon them, but from the depths of the combe faint gleams shone here and there. The path turned, and turned again, and as the heather yielded to rock brought them to a stream murmuring half hidden in the low, close-growing bushes about it.

Fay left her man with a whisper: "Wait, Harold. You

wait here." She moved along the bank, stooping to search the water or the verdure.

Harold waited, Harold gave no sign that he thought her irrational. In plaintive wonder Reggie sank down upon the heather. If the young woman had lost something there, not a chance in a million of finding it with that dim light. She went on and on, still peering, stopping to examine the plants. If she wanted to pick flowers, what a time to choose, what a place! Not much of a nosegay growing there. Nothing but shiny dark green, no glimmer of a flower.

But there were some other folks down by the stream. A girl's voice called: "'Ere, let's chuck it, Dolly", and another answered: "That's right, there ain't none out yet, not a perishing bud open, it's so late this year. Come on." Footfalls and voices receded up the other side of the combe.

Reggie asked his pensive mind what flowers in the world the damsels wanted. That low bush stuff by the water or in the water—probably St. John's wort—yes, would be. St. John's wort—Midsummer Eve—St. John's Eve. Oh. Some jolly old country custom, maids who pick St. John's flower on St. John's Eve get their heart's desire. And those maids who hadn't found one were laughing raucous up in the twilight—worse—they began to croon.

Fay had stopped. She bent low, she plucked something. She fluttered back to her Harold and put an arm round his neck. He took off his hat, he kissed her. As they parted, Reggie saw something pale in his buttonhole. He armed her across the stream, hand in hand they went on.

"Well, well," Reggie sighed and rose and followed.

They were out of the combe on the farther side, they turned towards the Knob. The golden glow in the west had gone and silvery light from the lucent sky was fading and the hills grew black and dim. But the tracks through the heather were numerous and on the crest of the Knob they came into the bustle of a scattered throng.

It was thickest about the mound of the bonfire. Tongues of flame moved at the base, the faggots crackled into a roar. Men stood back waving the torches with which they had lit it and shouted and the crowd roared cheers and there was a rush to make a circle and prance round the fire.

Out of that ring came a stubby man with the manner of a master of ceremonies and mopped his smutty face and shouted: "Ay, ay, go to it folks. She'll do now. Let's see you merry." He made for an old car and tilted a beer bottle into his mouth. "Shake your legs, girls." He passed from one to another with broad old jokes answered in kind but often in modern jargon. "Hey, why, what's here?" He stopped before Fay and her Harold and swung the little man round to the bonfire light. "If he han't got St. John's flower, now! Oh, Miss Fay! There's a do of it! Give 'e joy, surely. Eh, Mr. Davis?" He poked the little man's ribs and laughed loud.

"Oh, Noke," Fay fluttered, "don't. Don't make such a noise."

Noke tapped his shining nose and winked. "Dance it, bless 'e. You'll never go lighter, miss."

Harold drew her protectingly away.

"So that is that," said Reggie to himself. "Whatever that means. According to the sharp Cloudesley, she plays around too much. Nervous play, that play. Noke? Native to the soil, the man Noke. Full-blooded earth-man and with his ear to the knowing old earth. Noke was about when Cloudesley found the fluttering Fay with Gower after the church bell rang. He came over the hill, Cloudesley said, giving him a good wide alibi from our Mrs. Carson's game. But he was smart on to the girl and her playboy. Then and now."

The bonfire threw up a roaring pillar of flame, killed the stars and made the sky a black vault. In the glare on the hill-top, there was a weird mixture of dreary modern

dancing and the simple rollick of children's party games and primitive capers and horse-play. Dwarfed into gnomes by the bright, flickering blaze, casting grotesque shadows, they slid along in fox-trots, revolved to kiss-in-the-ring, chased one another and fought and leaped through corners of the fire to fall into the arms of new partners or old.

A quaint mixed crowd, too. Bunches of them, from the mushroom factories of Hurst, the hearty young things of any cheap town dance. More than a sprinkling of stolid country folks run wild. Bunches of hikers, earnestly orgiastic in shorts, male and female. Motoring parties, showy and shabby and nondescript respectable, labouring to be gay.

Reggie had withdrawn to the quieter verge where the dancing was orderly, where Harold held Fay gingerly in a one-step and discovered that someone else had an interest in them. A tall fellow without a coat stalked between the couples and stood in Harold's careful path and said, "What, is it you, Fay? 'Tarry, rash wanton! Am not I thy lord?'"

"Oh, Mr. Gower! Don't be silly," she cried.

"Don't be impertinent, Gower," Harold corrected her.

"My little changeling boy." Gower looked down at him. "Why," he took hold of the lapel of Harold's coat and lifted it to see the flower in the button-hole. "God be with you! 'The young maid stole from her cottage bower and blushed as she sought the plant of power.' Now are you consecrate, bless you, my children." He laughed and swung away into the darkness beyond the range of the fire.

But he was soon heard of again. A car hooted imperiously. "What the devil do you do that for?" his high voice asked.

"And why the hell don't you walk straight?" a woman answered him.

"I thank you, ma'am. I walk as I please. Your infernal Juggernaut has no rights here. You are only licensed to slaughter on the road."

"Let's make a date with you there. What'll it cost me? The price of a hen. Don't worry, you're not alive, my lad."

These exchanges interested Reggie. He approached and saw Gower stationary in front of the long bonnet of an open sports car in which a scrap of a woman was alone.

"Yes, indeed, ma'am," Gower was answering. "That's what offends you, since you've buried your own soul long ago. But you shall do no murders here. If you had a fig-leaf of humanity you would have left your murderous machine below the hill, like the rest of the motoring horde. Drive on——"

"Gosh, aren't you windy?" she gurgled and made a rude noise with her horn.

"—drive on," Gower would not have his sentence lost, "over our common into our common crowd and you will be for the everlasting bonfire by way of this one of ours. We're not for the hogs of the road, to-night at least."

She clapped her hands, she cried: "Hear, hear!" she sprang out of her car. "What is the name, kid?"

"I am Hugh Gower, ma'am."

"Meet Christabel Biggs. Do they let you stay in these parts?"

"I live here."

"And how! Come over and try Whitfold. My——"

"I am obliged to you. I have no time for the Biggs of Whitfold." Gower stalked away.

"Golly!" said Miss Biggs. She stood looking after him, she discovered Reggie and approached and pointed a finger at Gower's receding majesty. "Tell me, what is that?"

"I was wonderin' myself," Reggie murmured.

"He wants his hair cut," said Miss Biggs, surveyed Reggie, decided that he was not the man for the job or her and went on with a bird-like gait into the noisier revels and left him wondering also what she was. Her pert assurance did not please him.

She had found a friend, well, a man she knew, he looked as if he could do without her, there was another woman in the background. Reggie strolled towards them and saw that the man was Cloudesley, but before he reached the conversation Cloudesley had finished it and moved off with his companion. "I say, Cloudesley," Reggie spoke softly behind them, "who was that?"

Cloudesley swung round. "What a night!" he grinned. "Mr. Fortune, Miss Milburn."

Reggie saw a woman much more to his taste than Christabel Biggs. It has been charged against him that he fell for Sally Milburn then and there. "I'm a lone, lorn creature, Miss Milburn."

"Don't you dance?" said Sally. "You might jump, Mr. Fortune." She directed his eyes from her to the couples who were leaping and yelling. "Do jump through the fire."

"No, I'm too inflammable," Reggie sighed. "But who was that?"

Cloudesley and Sally laughed to one another. "It's catching," said he. "That was Miss Biggs, sir. She also stopped me to buy one, asking what that was. Don't get proud, though. She hadn't you in her eye, only comrade Gower. Sorry."

"I know," Reggie mourned. "She asked me what he was—I had to give it up. But you know everything. Doesn't he, Miss Milburn?"

"I haven't noticed it," Sally answered with some vigour.

"Discreet fellow," Reggie smiled upon them. "But who is Miss Biggs, Cloudesley?"

"She's from Australia," said Cloudesley brusquely. "Her mother bought Whitfold from Ludlow a year ago and they've set up there."

"Oh," said Reggie. "Like that."

"How do you mean?"

"As you said. Freshly fresh and newly new."

"Yes, she is," Cloudesley agreed. "How she's got on to comrade Gower, God knows."

"Well, well," Reggie murmured. "But I'm spoilin' your dance, Miss Milburn." He strolled away.

"That man's creepy, Tommy," Sally said under her breath.

"I should worry. It's a stunt." Cloudesley took her arm. "Don't you buy it, lady. Bless his baby face, he's all wrop in mystery to do the bogey man on you."

Sally allowed herself to be drawn into a waltz step. "But why does he come here?" she asked.

"They've put him on the Ma Carson crime. He has to do his stuff. He——"

"Yes, of course, but I mean, why does he come up here after you?"

"He didn't. He came first."

"Well, but why? Why is he asking about Hugh Gower and Miss Biggs? Why should he——"

"Help! Don't you get that way too! He's quite enough of a why-why child. He's the great Mr. Fortune looking for the nigger in the wood-pile in the dark where there isn't any pile or any nigger. He's running round in circles blind."

Sally peered through the firelight and the shadows. "There's Miss Biggs talking to Noke. I can't see Hugh Gower anywhere. I don't see Mr. Fortune. Do you think he's gone?"

"Bo!" said Cloudesley.

"What's that mean?"

"I always say bo to a goose, Sally. I bet you a dozen your Mr. Fortune dunno where he are."

"What of?"

"Make it stockings. You do wear 'em sometimes, don't you? And the size, moddam?"

Sally made play with a foot not of the smallest, and in the operation showed a pleasing leg. "Herring boxes without topsies were the shoes of Clementine. You'd have to get 'em made, Tommy."

"There's too many people," said Cloudesley, holding her firmly. "Come away."

"What's the matter?"

"You want smacking."

"Brave man. You really are almost as tall as I am," she smiled, leaning away from him.

"And much more human. Come along home, lady."

"It's not late. I'm no Cinderella."

"The dear old joke," Cloudesley said grimly. "Come on," he took her out of the dance and away.

Sally did not resist, but when they had passed from the glare and noise of the hill-top, "Well?" said she and removed herself from him.

"You're a bad girl," Cloudesley answered. "Good ones don't crab themselves."

"How smug of them! But you like that. Nothing doing with me, Tommy."

"No, you'll never be good. You could be kind, though."

She was silent for a moment. "I don't think so," she said gravely. "I don't want to be."

"Coward!" He drew close again. "Coward, Sally!"

She shook her head, she smiled to the dark. "I like what I have."

"You don't know what it is, alone."

"Myself," she said. "I'll keep that."

"You can't have yourself while you're single."

She laughed. "Only a man, aren't you? It's no good, Tommy. I'm sorry."

"That is the perishing limit," said Cloudesley. "Don't you dare."

"Well! Why couldn't we just go on—why did you bring me away——"

"For this," said Cloudesley sharply.

"Oh, Tommy," she held out her hand, "Good-bye. Friends!"

"And that be damned. I'm taking you home," he told her, and they went on in silence.

A westerly wind was rising, clouds had covered the sky before they came to the gate of the neat acres about her bungalow. She found her voice to ask him in. "There's bread and cheese and—and beer."

"You know what that means on Midsummer Eve? If I come in and drink a maid's ale to-night, she's married to me before the year's out."

"Sorry, Tommy," she said.

"Thanks very much," Cloudesley strode away.

Their departure from the firelit revels on the Knob was observed by the creepy Mr. Fortune, though Sally could not see him. But he had only a secondary interest in her. His mind was occupied with Miss Christabel Biggs and Cloudesley.

For he found the information of Cloudesley deceptive. According to Cloudesley, the great Ludlow had two estates in hand, his paternal inheritance of Whitfold and his wife's land at Hurst, and he was exploiting them marvellously, making pots of money. Yet the knowing Cloudesley also knew that he had lately sold Whitfold to the Australian mamma of Miss Biggs, which Cloudesley didn't mention till Miss Biggs came throwing her weight about. Remarkable omission.

Remarkable wench, the Biggs girl. Why should she join the merry throng of Hurst at the bonfire? A bright young thing might go anywhere for a rag, but not alone. Curiouser and curiouser. Rich damsel from a big house

driving over to butt into a mixed crowd going gay without a boy friend. Might have been expecting one. Rather a questing manner. Hadn't found him though—or had she?—for all her who's who she might have done business with the wild Gower before. Well! He'd gone, same like the happy couples. But she was going too. The torpedo car whizzed and vanished.

Reggie strolled slowly away from the fire and the untiring crowd and returning to the inn asked for Mr. Cloudesley. But Bunyard couldn't find him, Bunyard thought he'd gone out, was there anything, sir?

"Oh, no. No. Good night." Reggie went to bed.

To his aggrieved surprise it was a little while before he slept. Shut eyes still saw visions of fire and capering couples in it. "Midsummer night's dream," he mumbled gloomily. But he is without the capacity for dreaming. The sleep which came soon was untroubled.

Of what was being done that night in Hurst his mind had no suspicion.

CHAPTER VI

MAN ON THE LINE

IT IS NEVER before nine that the postman who serves the far-scattered houses of the uplands of Hurst reaches the Knob Inn. On the morning of Midsummer Day he did not arrive till long after the hour and thus came under the observation of Reggie, who had then just sat down to breakfast.

A pleasant confidence that there could be no letters for him restrained Reggie from any interest as the postal bicycle passed the window. He had finished grilled ham and scrambled eggs, he was drinking his last cup of coffee, before the postman passed again. It seemed to Reggie that he had taken a long time over his job. And he took more. He was pushing his bicycle and Bunyard walked beside him in close confabulation. They stopped, they stood by the roadside talking for some minutes before the postman cycled away.

Reggie went out to meet the returning Bunyard with a gentle question. "Well, what's the news?"

"Sir?" Bunyard stared and sucked his teeth. "The papers don't come up with the post."

"No. The news does though, what?"

"Ah, I see what you mean, sir. Postman was just telling me there's been a man killed on the railway, that's all."

"Oh. Railwayman?"

"No, sir, just a man crossing the railway. They found him on the line. Posty says he was cut up something shocking."

"Too bad. Who was he?"

"Name of Davis, sir. He lives close to the railway."

Reggie's eyelids drooped as he watched Bunyard's large weatherbeaten countenance, which also was watchful. "Mr. Harold Davis, of the wireless factory?"

"Yes, sir. Something in the wireless works, he is."

"Here last night, wasn't he?"

"I don't call to mind. We had such a crowd, sir."

"Well, well. Is Mr. Cloudesley down yet?"

Bunyard grinned broadly. "Mr. Cloudesley don't lie this late, sir. He's out with the dog an hour gone."

"I see. All right. Tell my chauffeur I want the car." Reggie strolled away lighting a pipe and opened a deck-chair on the crazy pavement of the garden. The grass was still sparkling wet from rain brought on the westerly wind of midnight, but the wind had grown gentle again and only scattered, dwindling clouds moved slowly across the sunshine.

The car slid to the door. "Downhill, Sam," he said as he got in. "Go easy. Ask the first native where Miss Milburn lives."

They arrived after two misses at the split fence which circled Sally's land and her white bungalow. Sally, in a darned jumper and trousers tucked into thick boots, was doctoring a new salad bed with soot. She did not hear the purr of the car. She straightened her bent back with a start to see Reggie picking his way among her frames and cloches.

"Good morning, Miss Milburn. What a jolly garden. Sorry to bother you. Too bad to interrupt. But did you notice what time Davis went off last night?"

"No." She looked at him with a troubled frown. "Why?"

"He's been killed on the line—poor chap."

"On the railway—when—how?"

"That's what I have to find out," Reggie murmured.

"But I don't know anything about it. It's horrible."

"Not pleasant, no. Rather difficult too. Can't put a time to when he was last seen. You saw him up there on the Knob, didn't you?"

"Yes, with——" she stopped. "I can't be sure."

"Oh yes," Reggie gave a twisted smile. "With Miss Fay Carter. When did they go? Where did they go?"

"I don't know at all. Mr. Davis had gone before we did."

"We? Ah, you and Cloudesley. Yes. And then you came down here?"

"Mr. Cloudesley came with me, just to the gate," she said fiercely. "We didn't see Mr. Davis at all."

"Thanks very much. And the time?"

"I'm not sure. It was before midnight."

"Yes. I think so. Sorry you've been troubled. Where's the nearest telephone?"

"The post office by the church." She turned away to her soot.

"I know the way there," Reggie murmured, and the soot flew. "Do you get many slugs? Wire-worm, I should have thought."

"There are all sorts of pests," she said over her shoulder.

"A tryin' world, yes. I'm soot myself," Reggie sighed, and went back to his car.

In the tiny post office by the church he rang up the chief constable. "Fortune speakin'. From Hurst. Did you know? It's had another accident. Fatal, this one. Doing anything about it?"

Over the wire the voice of Lacy was thick with irritation. "Do you mean the man killed on the line this morning? What on earth is there to do?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Reggie purred.

"Quite so. The poor fellow was run over by a train."

"That's what I've heard. At third hand or worse. How good is your information?"

"I have a report from the railway people and the sergeant at Hurst. There's no mystery how a man was killed when a train went over him."

"Shouldn't be. No. However. I want to look at him, Lacy."

"What on earth are you suggesting?"

"I don't like this place. That's why I'm here. There's something wrong with it. Quite a lot wrong."

"Do you mean to tell me you expected this fellow to be killed?"

"Oh, no. No. Can't think why he was killed. I did expect more nasty stuff would come out. Therefore I stayed. No use so far. This man's dead. Am I proud? Not so, but far otherwise. However. Study to improve. You must pass him to me."

The telephone muttered. "Well, I have to take your opinion, Fortune," the words came reluctantly. "What are your grounds of suspicion?"

"This man didn't mean to be killed last night."

The telephone spluttered. "I don't suppose he did," Lacy was loud, "who does mean to be knocked down by a train?"

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Lots of 'em," Reggie sighed.

"You want to make it suicide?"

"Never want to make anything," Reggie was angry. "I want the truth. Don't you?"

"Certainly. Very well. The body is on the railway premises at present. We're sending an ambulance. I'll send Lucas with it. You had better meet him at the station."

By the road up which the chief constable had driven him to see Mrs. Carson, Reggie returned to look at Harold Davis. Out of heather and gorse still glinting from the night's rain, the car came down to the chequered eruption of building across the flats and the noise of the high-road. On the way to the station they passed a large sign-board

which, between golden lightning flashes, was inscribed Jove Radio and announced that its Hurst Works were there. They spread, a range of one-story cement with a lot of glass, inside an enclosure which gave them plenty of room to grow. They were well placed, the highway with its pylons of power wires all along one side and the railway just across the road.

A hundred yards beyond was the station. Reggie presented himself to a reluctant station-master. "I'm meetin' Inspector Lucas here. About this poor chap Davis. How did it happen?"

"I've phoned the police already, all we can tell. He was run over by the up goods at the accommodation crossing, half a mile down the line. The goods should pass there at 5.4 approx., and she was on time."

"Five a.m. Not dark then on Midsummer Day."

The station-master snorted. "Not light, neither. This morning it was dark, heavy rain and wind. No fault of the driver's he didn't see the man in time."

"My dear chap! I wasn't saying that. However. The driver didn't see him till the train was on him."

"The driver was looking out all right; he saw something on the line, felt his engine go over something and pulled up quick. It's a blind crossing."

"Oh, yes. Why should Davis be goin' across the line there at five a.m.?"

"You don't know much about this place, do you? That crossing, it's a short cut to Mr. Davis's house from anywhere up beyond." The station-master jerked a thumb at the hills. "He often used it. And last night everybody was up at the bonfire on the Knob. Just the way he would go home. He——"

Inspector Lucas came into the station-master's office and at his heels was Dr. Ranford.

"Well, well," Reggie surveyed them dreamily. "Here we are again. Let's see what we can do this time, Ranford."

"Dr. Ranford's the police surgeon for the district, sir," Lucas told him.

"Splendid. Where's the body?"

"I shall be very glad to have it removed," the station-master bustled out. "This way." He took them down to a siding, he unlocked the door of a shed. "There you are."

On a hurdle lay something covered with a tarpaulin. Reggie drew that back from a mangled body.

Lucas muttered something and gulped and the station-master fled.

"Open that door wide," said Reggie. The sunlight broke in upon hideous crushed wounds. "Well, well," he murmured plaintive resignation and inspected them. After a little while he left them to Ranford, he moved to the dead man's head on which no wound was to be seen. Its face was pale, but of the prim calm which it wore in life, a queer contrast to the body's immolation. Reggie lifted the head, turned it to the light . . . looked close. . . .

Ranford had already finished his examination. "Well, what do you say?" Reggie asked.

"The injuries are quite consistent with the account given by the railwaymen," said Ranford.

"Oh, yes! Yes. He was run over by a train some six hours ago. Anything else occur to you?"

Ranford compressed his lips. "It is to be remarked that the amount of bleeding appears slight."

"Quite good. However. Verify everything. May have bled on the spot. Better see it."

"If you think so, Mr. Fortune." Ranford was supercilious.

"Afraid I do," said Reggie sadly. He wandered out and contemplated the railway track with resentment. "Half a mile of that! Can't we get to this crossing by car?"

They did. Returning past the wireless factory they turned off the high-road into an unmetalled cart track and stopped at a gate in the railway fence.

"Here you are, Mr. Fortune," said Lucas. "That's Davis's house just over the other side." He pointed to the undulating red roof of a modernized cottage.

"I see. Any housekeeper or servants?"

"Nobody living in. He had a daily woman do for him."

"The simple life. He would be like that." Reggie followed Ranford on to the line, watched curiously by a gang of platelayers at their noontide bread and bacon.

Ranford stopped and pointed to the sleepers and the ballast. "I think you will agree those are bloodstains, Mr. Fortune."

"Oh, yes. This is the place. And not much blood, Ranford."

Ranford looked wise. "You should remember that rain was falling at the time."

"Thanks. Satisfied?"

"I take it you are suggesting that Davis was dead before the train ran over him."

"My dear Ranford! Very acute. Would account for his failure to bleed, wouldn't it?"

"It is perhaps a tenable theory," said Ranford. "Then you are of opinion Davis was placed on the line after death?"

"Good Lord!" Lucas exclaimed and looked from one to the other. Ranford was complacent, Reggie plaintive.

"Is that what you think, Mr. Fortune?"

"Yes. Very good opinion, Dr. Ranford's opinion."

Ranford smiled. "I did not say that it was my opinion."

"My dear chap! Don't hedge now," Reggie reproached him. "Accounts for failure of body to bleed. Accounts for failure of the driver to see him. He was dead. He was lying on the rails. And then the train got him."

"You will forgive me, you are not very exact, Mr. Fortune," Ranford spoke with cold delight.

"Oh, Ranford!" Reggie's voice went high. "What have I done? Tell me quick."

"It is rather what you have omitted," Ranford instructed him. "You do not consider all the facts. My own opinion is that the man was dead when the train passed over him. But I find your opinion that he was placed upon the line after death quite without foundation. Pray excuse me, I must point out to you that, though steam-engines work the goods trains, the line is electrified for passenger traffic. You see there are two live rails."

"So there are! One each side! You do notice things, Ranford." Reggie gazed at him with reverence.

"Surely it is clear, the poor fellow, stumbling home tired in the rain, fell upon a live rail and was killed by the shock and lay there till the train mutilated him."

"You put it very clear. Yes." Reggie's eyelids drooped. "What's the current here—five to six hundred volts?"

"I don't know the precise voltage, but I can tell you there have been cases of death from contact with the live rails."

"Thanks very much." Reggie turned and looked along the line and called to the platelayers. "I say! Is the current on the live rail all night?"

"Sir?" The ganger stood up. "No, sir. Switch off after the last passenger up and down just afore midnight. Switch on at six o'clock in the morning."

Reggie turned to Ranford with a small, bleak smile. "So what?" he said softly. "If he'd been killed by shock from the live rail here, he'd have been run over by one of those passenger trains. After they passed, the rail couldn't kill him. Some error, Ranford. Killed elsewhere. Put on the line by a clever fellow. His error. Didn't think of the current being switched off at night. Didn't think the body might show things to somebody who knew his job. You haven't looked at the body."

"I beg your pardon!" Ranford was flushed and furious. "I——"

"That's all right. Meet me at the mortuary. Three o'clock—can do?"

Lucas broke out. "Do you know how he was killed then, Mr. Fortune?"

"Yes, I think so," Reggie murmured. "Some injuries before death." He gazed at Ranford with closing eyes. "Heavy, blunt instrument. Same like Mrs. Carson. By the way, has Mrs. Carson remembered anything about what hit her—tool from a car or so?"

Ranford took a moment to pick up the sudden change of subject. "She can remember nothing definite. I don't expect it now. She told me that the blow was like iron."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "Mortuary at three."

"I will arrange to be there, Mr. Fortune." Ranford stalked to his car and drove away.

CHAPTER VII

FLOWER IN THE MUD

REGGIE STOOD STILL, gazing all round.

"Well, sir," Lucas asked for elucidation. "You haven't half given Dr. Ranford socks. But what were you getting to? Do you really connect this chap's death with Mrs. Carson's business?"

"Connection not clear, no. Very dark background. Depths of background in this place. Lots of nasty forces rumblin' unseen. And every now and then a grab out of the murk at somebody. There'll be more—unless we can make a kill or two."

"I say!" Lucas muttered. "Who are you thinking of? Not Ranford himself?"

"No definite thought. I am not exact yet. As our Ranford was saying. The mind is quite vague. Too many possibilities. Too much evidence. And not enough. Don't be rash, Lucas. Our Ranford may be only an unfortunate, confusin' accident. I should say there are others. However. Don't believe anything till you have to. Where does Miss Fay Carter live?"

"Miss Carter? With her father, of course. Up there by the factory. Mr. Carter's house is just this side. Why?"

"She was up on the Knob with Davis last night. A-conjuring summer in. But not for Davis—in this world."

"Good Lord! You had your eye on Davis and her before he was killed? Why, what made you think of watching them?"

"Didn't think of it. They just happened. I stayed here to watch what would happen. Watchin' for every-

thing, anything. Peerin' into the dark. And this killing came out. Come on, ask Miss Carter what she knows about it."

The Carters' house, larger and more pretentious than anything else on the Hurst flats, stood back from the road behind young struggling firs and cypresses in grounds which adjoined the factory.

Reggie and Lucas sat down to wait for Fay in a fussy old-fashioned drawing-room. She was some time coming, but she came with a rush. "Oh, good morning. I'm sorry. I was just getting ready for lunch. Did you want to see my father? He's not in, he won't be in to-day. He's so busy at the works." She put her handkerchief to her mouth, she was wan, her eyes red and swollen.

"That's all right, Miss Carter," said Lucas. "It's you I wanted to talk to."

"Oh, did you? Why? Are you Inspector Lucas?"

"I am. This is Mr. Fortune."

She gave Reggie a puzzled, frightened look. "How do you do?" she said faintly. "What is it?"

"You must have heard of Mr. Davis being killed."

"Yes, they told me," her voice quavered and she began to cry. "He was run over by a train. It's frightful. Don't—don't talk about it."

"Very sad, miss," said Lucas. "Now I have to ask you some questions."

"Why? I can't tell you anything. I don't know how it happened. I can't think."

Then Reggie asked: "Was Davis a friend of yours?"

She stared at him through tears. "Of course he was, that's why it's so horrible."

"You don't suppose he committed suicide"—Reggie dragged out the words—"You didn't expect that—last night?"

She made a shrill sound of distress. "No, no, I didn't. Did he? Was it——?"

"I wonder," Reggie answered. "Where did you leave him?"

"But I didn't leave him," she cried.

Reggie glanced at Lucas, and Lucas said: "Come, come, miss, when did you see Davis last?"

"Why, last night. We went up to look at the bonfire and he just brought me home again and—and—and said good night."

"Oh yes," Reggie murmured. "Was there anyone else about?"

"No, there wouldn't be."

"Like that," Reggie sighed. "I'm sorry."

"He didn't come indoors with you?" Lucas asked. She shook her head. "You said good night outside the house?" She nodded. "And then he went away home?"

"Well, of course. I didn't see. But he would."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice. How should I? I wasn't thinking about time."

"Some of your servants could tell me?" Lucas suggested.

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. They'd all gone to bed. It was late."

"After midnight?"

"I don't know, really I don't. Just late."

"Had your father gone to bed?"

"Father? I didn't see him. I suppose he had."

"Would that make it after midnight? What time does he usually go to bed?"

"There isn't any usually."

"You're not helping me, miss," Lucas glowered at her.

"But I've told you all I know. I can't do any more. Oh, you are cruel."

"Excuse me, I'm not. It's my duty to find out how this poor man met his death. I'm sorry you don't assist me. You'd better think it over. There'll be an inquest on him

and you'll have to give evidence. I——" Reggie touched his arm. "That's all I have to say now."

"Good-bye, Miss Carter," Reggie murmured. "It is difficult."

She ran out of the room in front of them.

When they had left the house, "There's a nasty little bag of tricks," said Lucas. "I hate that crying kind, don't you? I don't believe she's half as upset as she makes out."

"Yes, I think so," Reggie sighed. "All that and more. Not a strong mind, her mind. Futile in fear."

"She's scared all right, but what of? You asked if there was anybody else about. I suppose you meant some other man she goes with."

"It could be. Several other men took an interest in Davis and her last night. Your friend Gower. Noke. I think Cloudesley noticed them."

"I say! You do see things, Mr. Fortune."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap. What I'm here for. Curious and interestin'. Cloudesley, Noke, Gower. We had those three round about her on the day of Mrs. Carson's affair."

"Gower!" said Lucas. "I told you, didn't I, he's a wild devil and always after some girl."

"You did. Rather wild last night. Let's ask father if he heard anything when daughter came home. He's at the works now, she said." They took a path through the grounds of the house which brought them beyond a belt of young trees to a gate in the high factory fence. On the other side it crossed some fifty yards of coarse grass before it reached the office in the middle of the range of workshops.

Reggie gazed at them benignly. "Very good. Modern industry at its brightest and best. Wide open spaces, so men can be men. Lots of air and light. No dirt. No smoke. All electric." From the pylons on the high-road wires came down and spread in a low web, feeding power everywhere. "New industrial revolution. Bliss was it in

that dawn to be alive. You feel that? Factories anywhere and everywhere. Happy days."

He loitered, he looked all round as the path joined the track from the road by the office. Lucas went in and asked for Mr. Scott Carter.

Carter's room was exuberantly modern, all one side of it casement window, the three others glass upon a green background, the floor green rubber, his desk metal covered with dark enamel, the chairs on frames of stainless steel.

But he looked and dressed like the business man of last century, black-coated, starchily correct, plump and pink, with his hair close cropped and a spreading moustache. He had a plate of sandwiches and a decanter of sherry in front of him. "Will you join me in a glass of wine, inspector?" he asked brusquely.

"No, thank you, sir. I've called about Mr. Davis's death."

"So I supposed. Poor fellow, that's a shocking thing. He was my right-hand man, a very good brain. He had a fine career before him."

"You don't think it was suicide?" Reggie murmured.

"Good heavens, no! That never occurred to me. Davis was devoted to his work and doing brilliantly. It must have been an accident. Those live rails are dangerous in the dark."

Reggie glanced at Lucas and Lucas went on: "I've just been talking to your daughter, sir. She tells me Mr. Davis saw her home last night. Could you put a time to that?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I know she went up to the bonfire with him. I'd gone to bed before she came home. I'm an early bird. I have to be. My best work's done in the morning, and we're making large contracts now. Couldn't Fay tell you when she got in?"

"No, sir. Miss Carter was quite uncertain."

"H'm," Carter muttered. "Poor girl. She's naturally

upset. Davis and she were great friends. He'd have brought her back about eleven or so. She doesn't care for being out late. What's your point, inspector?"

"I want to know when Davis was last seen alive, sir."

"Oh, quite. Well, I went to bed at ten-thirty and I went to sleep at once. I can't help you directly. But you can take it from me she'd have been indoors well before midnight. There's no doubt at all Davis would go straight home, and his way would be over the level-crossing, a matter of ten minutes."

"I see. Being asleep, of course you didn't see or hear anyone about when he left Miss Carter at your door."

"Naturally I didn't." Carter frowned. "Why, does Fay think there was somebody? She hasn't said anything of the kind to me."

"No, she said there wasn't," Lucas answered. "But we have to make complete enquiries in a case like this. Do you know of any man being jealous of Mr. Davis and Miss Carter?"

"Bless my soul, the girl's only a child!" Carter exclaimed. "I never thought of such a thing. Why, what are you working upon?"

"Very attractive girl," Reggie murmured.

Carter gave an angry laugh. "I suppose she is. What then? You mean to suggest some brute was spying on Fay and Davis last night?"

"It could be," said Reggie.

"What a foul thing! Is there any evidence of it?"

"Several fellows on the Knob last night."

"No doubt there were. And some very queer characters. We have a few here."

"Who are you thinking of, Mr. Carter?"

Carter made an impatient gesture. "That bonfire draws everybody. I'm not thinking of anyone in particular. You know the place as well as I do, inspector. There are loose,

ill-conditioned fellows about. But, my God, I never heard of one meddling with Fay. What is all this tending to?"

"Possibility that Davis was murdered," said Reggie.

"Murdered? Murdered out of jealousy?"

"You hadn't thought of that?"

"It's a horrible idea. Surely it's preposterous. Have you any sort of reason to suppose Davis's death wasn't accidental?"

"Must try everything," Reggie sighed and stood up.

"However. You can't help us?"

"Indeed I can't. For God's sake don't start a scandal. It would kill Fay."

"Oh, I hope not. Good-bye."

When they were outside, Reggie took Lucas's arm and drew him across the gravel track and pointed. "See that? Pick it up."

In the mud at the edge lay a yellow flower with broken stalk.

"Give it to me," Reggie took it and sauntered away, looking up at the web of power wires.

"What is it, sir?" Lucas whispered.

"St. John's wort. Maiden's magic. Come on. Want my lunch. Before I do the body."

CHAPTER VIII

TEA AND TALK

THAT AFTERNOON SALLY Milburn walked up towards the hills again. After she reached the slopes of heather her stride shortened, she loitered, she went this way and that for some time before she decided to go on to the inn.

It gave her no welcome, no sign of life. She sat down in the empty garden. After some time Bunyard showed himself at a window, blinked, rolled out to her. "Beg pardon, miss, I didn't see you come. I'll be in the rattle for that. What would you like for tea?"

"It's all right. Just bread and butter."

He made a sorrowful noise and departed.

The Airedale, Dingo, came into the garden, stretched his front half and his back half, yawned vastly, emitting a remark of genial content with the world, looked round for something to do to it, discovered Sally, bounded to her, waggling all his rearward, put his paws on her lap and aimed a comprehensive lick at her face.

She dodged that. He gave her a bark of impudent affection, sat down and adored her and persuaded her anxious gravity to smile.

Cloudesley sped to them. "Very well thus, lady. We have no morals but we're full of charm."

Her smile died. "Oh, Tommy," she said softly. "I thought you'd have been out on the hill."

"Bless you. Curse me, I was putting in a bit of shut-eye. We're lazy hounds, me and Dingo. But you're here and we're here, so what do we care?"

She would not be amused. "Didn't you sleep last night?"

"Like the dead. But——"

"Don't!" she whispered.

"Why, what? Oh, I'm there. Sorry, my dear. I'd forgotten the Davis man. You——"

"Don't!" she said again.

Bunyard was arriving with a tea-tray for two and a luxuriance of food.

"Has your friend come yet, Miss Milburn?" Cloudesley asked formally.

"I'm alone," said Sally and Bunyard sucked his teeth.

"Think of Dingo's feelings. May we have the honour?"

"Thank you, then." Sally gave him a perfunctory smile. When Bunyard had gone she leaned across the table. "Tommy! Has Mr. Fortune been asking you things to-day?"

Cloudesley put his solemn face very close to hers and his eyes twinkled. "I haven't seen the cherub, lady. He buzzed off after breakfast while the hound had me out walking."

"Is he coming back here?"

"I hope so! He hasn't paid his bill."

"He came to me, Tommy——"

"Hear me curse. Blow his blushing eyes!"

"Oh, it isn't funny. He's horrible. He told me about Mr. Davis being killed, and then he kept asking what we saw, what we did, you and me. It was ghastly—when we saw Mr. Davis last, whether you came home with me, and what time it was you left me."

"The blinking baby sleuth!" said Cloudesley. "And what did you do? Tell him where he got off?"

"I told him it was before midnight. That's right, isn't it?"

"As near as nothing. And about seeing Davis?"

"I didn't know what time we saw him last. Do you?"

"Not a guess. I wasn't wasting my soul on Davis last night." He looked into her eyes.

"Don't!" she hid them. "Tommy—that man thinks Mr. Davis was murdered. He didn't say so—not straight out——"

"You're telling me! He don't know how to talk straight."

"But he meant it. Oh, he's weird. Tommy, he scares me. You just came back here, didn't you?"

"Yes, lady. Gnashing my teeth all the way. Not over Davis's luck, though."

"Luck!" Sally cried.

"Sorry. I kick myself. Clumsy ass. But no vice in the brute, believe me. I liked the Davis man—what there was of him. And I wasn't grudging him all he'd have with Fay, poor beggar."

Sally gazed at his sharp, solemn face. "You're so hard," she said. "Do you think he was murdered?"

"Forget it. Fat boy Fortune just wants to make your flesh creep. Comrade Gower isn't a man of action."

"You believe he meant——"

"Try our bilberry jam, Miss Milburn," said Cloudesley with crisp emphasis. "A spot of cream on one of those tarts is well thought of."

Christabel Biggs, like a running bird, arrived behind Sally's chair and he stood up. "Good afternoon. Can I send you tea out here or——"

"Mr. Cloudesley, isn't it?" she chirped. "Do sit down. I'd like some tea, but I'm alone. May I join you?"

"Please," said Cloudesley, set a chair and ceremoniously introduced Sally to her.

"That's fine." Christabel flopped down, a wisp of a woman in crimson linen, thrust out slim legs, brushed back her curling mop of black hair and her dark eyes gleamed in a study of Sally's grave pink-and-white simplicity. "I've been dying to meet you, Miss Milburn."

"Miss Milburn, this is fame," said Cloudesley.

"Now, Mr. Cloudesley! Our legs aren't here for you to pull," she flashed at him and turned to Sally. "You run one of the market gardens here all on your own, don't you?"

"A very little one," Sally answered.

"I've heard it's a wonder."

"Yes, we have the best salad," said Cloudesley.

"I'm not handing Miss Milburn butter," Christabel snapped. "I think she's great, a woman taking on a pioneer show and beating the field. May I come and see your place some day? I don't know the first thing about it, but I'm crazy about women making a do on new jobs. This development stuff down here has got me going good. It's a marvel what Mr. Ludlow's made of his bad lands."

Bunyard came with a tray of tea for her, but she was not to be stopped by food or drink. She chattered on about market gardens and poultry farms, asking questions thirteen to the dozen and never waiting for an answer.

She had been round in her car by the church, hit up against the parson. Not so good, what? She couldn't get a rise out of him. Why didn't he pull his weight? A dear old priest, but nothing doing to show he was alive. Why couldn't he start things for folks? They didn't seem to get together at all, never had any social do. That show last night, of course, not a bad rag. But how often?

"Once a year," said Cloudesley. "Then we are above ourselves. Quite English, don't you know?"

"Says you. Real English can go gay as well as any bunch on earth. What do you think, Miss Milburn?"

"We like ourselves," said Sally.

"You have a right," Christabel twinkled at her. "But why be shy? What——" She stopped to look at a man sauntering into the garden, a man of some height and more elegant clothes than most visitors brought to the Knob Inn, a grey-haired man with a genial, tired face. "Why, Mr. Ludlow, I thought you were in London."

Ludlow took off his hat. "You're always nearly right. I was till lunch. How do you do, Miss Milburn? May I——?" He made a little gesture and sat down with them.

"Mrs. Ludlow said you weren't coming back to-day," Christabel told him.

"I wasn't till I started. When did you see her?"

"Just now. I met her coming out of the church with the parson."

Ludlow's smile mocked her. "When did you learn the way to church?"

"Miss Biggs knows her way everywhere," said Cloudesley. "She has the whole place by heart."

"I haven't got it in my head," Christabel cried. "It's all muzzy to me, Mr. Ludlow."

Bunyard brought more tea and Sally poured out.

"Thank you," said Ludlow. "She doesn't understand us, does she, Miss Milburn? We're making things grow."

"Some growth. I give you that," Christabel retorted. "But it's any old how. I went up to your old bonfire last night. A rare old rackety crowd. But did they mix? No! All split up playing different games so they shouldn't meet the wrong people. It's not human."

"Why, we're not," Ludlow smiled. "We are English." He lit a cigarette. "I say, Cloudesley, what's this story in the early evening papers about a man being killed on the line after the bonfire?"

"I don't know what the papers have got." Cloudesley was brusque. "The man's Davis, of the wireless works. He was run over by a train about five o'clock this morning."

"Davis? I've met him. Poor fellow. How was it?"

"On the level-crossing by his house. He had been up at the bonfire."

"Rather late getting home, wasn't he?"

"They keep it up till dawn."

"How could they?" Christabel cried. "It was pouring after midnight."

"I don't know when the rain began," said Cloudesley. "I was asleep."

"Yes, you and Miss Milburn went off very early." She made eyes at them. "What was the man like, Mr. Cloudesley, was there anyone with him?"

"A little fellow, nothing to notice," Cloudesley was curt. "He had brought a lady up there."

"A fluffy blonde?"

"You don't flatter her."

"Oh, she was pretty. Then I did see them. That Gower creature was prowling after her."

"Hugh Gower?" Ludlow gave a sardonic laugh. "I daresay. Who was the girl, Cloudesley?"

"Miss Carter."

Ludlow frowned. "They went off together with Gower after them?"

"I didn't see them go."

"But I did," said Christabel in a hurry. "They went early like you, and Gower on their heels."

"We'd better not imagine things," Ludlow gave her a glance of rebuke. "It's a tragic affair. He was at the start of a good career, poor lad."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Christabel meekly enough and the tea-party broke up, and in their several cars she and Ludlow drove away.

Sally looked at Cloudesley with a troubled brow and whispered: "Why did she say that?"

"She said mouthfuls. Which?"

"About Gower going on their heels. I don't believe it."

"You wouldn't. But she isn't much like you."

"Do you think he did, Tommy?" She looked into his eyes.

"I wouldn't put it past him. He's not a nice bit of work, lady. You know Fay's one of his fancies. He had a turn up with poor little Davis and her on the Knob."

"You're talking like Miss Biggs," Sally cried. "I understand her, she's spiteful. She'd got mad at Gower somehow last night."

"Yes, one dam' thing after another, comrade Gower's night out. He has a way with him, hasn't he? He'll run against something hard some day."

Sally winced, made an exclamation of horror, and strode off.

The dog Dingo put his nose against Cloudesley's legs, looked devoutly up at him and looked after Sally. "Nothing doing, boy," said Cloudesley. "Lady don't love us. Come and eat worms."

About this time Reggie, in the mortuary of Merchester, put the dead man's head together again, whistling the while serene joy out of Mozart—the theme of the first movement of the great G Minor symphony.

Ranford, flushed to a sweat, moved back unsteadily and cleared his throat, but still had to watch in fearful fascination.

The head and the music were finished together. Reggie covered the body again with precise care and turned. "You agree, Ranford?"

Ranford gulped. "Certainly, Mr. Fortune."

"All right. Come and tell the higher intelligence."

Behind Reggie, a very meek Ranford entered the room of the chief constable.

"Well, major, here we are again." Reggie beamed upon Lacy's hostile frown. "Dr. Ranford's discovered the cause of death."

"Has he! I suppose that wasn't very difficult," Lacy snorted.

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! We have our uses. Interestin' problem. Ingenious bit of work. However. All clear."

"Go ahead, Ranford," Lacy cried. "Let's have it."

Ranford gave it him at length and his impatience

fidgeted, changed to bewilderment and broke out in objections of angry dismay.

"I am bound to tell you that there can be no doubt," Ranford asserted his dignity.

"No probable, possible shadow of doubt!" Reggie hummed, "No possible doubt whatever.' Medical evidence clear and conclusive. Up to you now, major."

"It's astounding," Lacy exclaimed. "You—really you must allow me to say, Mr. Fortune, I find you very hard to follow. In Mrs. Carson's case we had practically definite evidence of murderous assault, but you insisted that we must dismiss it as an accident."

Ranford started and looked anxiety at Reggie's dreamy content.

"Quite so," Lacy nodded. "There Dr. Ranford did not agree with you. But now, when all the material evidence on Davis's death points to accident, you find scientific reasons to suppose that he was murdered and you have persuaded Dr. Ranford to the same opinion."

"Oh, major. Shouldn't talk like that," Reggie reproached him. "No persuasion, was there, Ranford? Only proof. Only the facts."

"I am in complete agreement," said Ranford. "The medical facts are decisive."

"As you say. Sorry to be inconvenient, major. However. I came here to tell you the truth. Mrs. Carson was accidental. Curiously accidental and highly interestin'. Davis was murdered. Another interestin' curiosity in Hurst. I wonder. However. Now you have the truth, take the requisite action. May I use your telephone?" He took it, he rang up the Knob Inn. "Mr. Cloudesley there? Evening. Fortune speakin'. Shan't be back to-night. Keep my room. Good-bye." He turned to Lacy. "Goin' up to town. When's the inquest? Day after to-morrow? I'll be there. Give Inspector Lucas his head. He has a line. Good-bye."

CHAPTER IX

HOW?

CORRUGATED IRON OUTSIDE, shiny, sticky matchboarding within, one frowsty hall served every public purpose in Hurst. Its walls told the fame of friendly societies, Foresters and Buffaloes, invited to flower show and poultry show, lectures for women and jovialities for men, when the doors opened to the inquest on Harold Davis.

The hall-keeper and the coroner's officer were soon in angry throes. Their arrangement of benches for the public more than sufficed. The inhabitants of Hurst were as little interested in the fate of Davis as the official mind could desire. But no local eye had ever seen such an invasion of the Press. The card-table with three chairs, the wonted generous provision at Mershire county inquests for the local papers, drew storms of derision and wrath from a platoon of London reporters, agency men, special correspondents, all expert in demonstrating their indispensable importance.

It is hard to convince any Mershire man of the value of a stranger, but they did succeed in extorting a blackboard upon trestles and a couple of benches, and overflowed therefrom into seats reserved for people who were somebody. The two masters of the ceremony withdrew in disorder and asked one another whatever the London papers thought they were doing to make such a fuss and fret over an inquest out at Hurst.

When the chief constable came in he was equally shocked by the array. He turned upon Inspector Lucas, growling

a stern demand for explanation of the presence of all those dam' scribblers. Lucas shook a head of thought too deep for trifles, a complacent head. "There's no telling how the papers get hold of things, sir." He arranged himself and opened a portfolio and surveyed the Press with majestic satisfaction and they grinned at him, but they were still more amused by the morose chief constable.

Reggie sat down beside him and made room for a prim, cadaverous person. "How are things, major? You don't know Ive?" Without any sort of welcome the chief constable greeted Mr. Ive, of the Public Prosecutor's staff. Ive looked over the congestion of reporters as if they were not there, and looked sideways at Reggie. But Reggie's eyes were not to be seen, his round face drowsily content.

Among the inconsiderable public he remarked Noke and Cloudesley. In the seats for persons of importance Ludlow took his place. Carter, of the wireless works, was there already. Nobody else to matter.

The coroner, a brisk old fellow, in spite of his paunch, rattled through the formal preliminaries. Hugh Gower, in the shabbiest of coats and without a tie, swaggered to a place among the proletariat while the jury were gone to view the body.

As they came back Christabel Biggs tripped in, stood with her head on one side, looking round the hall, and chose to join Ludlow. He did not conceal surprise, he seemed to receive her with paternal admonition, and she whispered chatter to which he listened perfunctorily.

Behind a hand Reggie murmured to Ive: "Drawn all the obvious possibilities," and named them.

An insignificant clerical person, the secretary of the wireless works, testified that the body was the body of Davis, and departed.

The driver of the goods train followed to relate that he approached the level-crossing on time at four minutes

past five a.m. at twenty miles an hour, in heavy rain, but he could see all right. He was keeping a good look out. He'd swear the man he ran over wasn't walking, wasn't even standing up, he was flat on the line before the engine hit him. The fireman confirmed all that.

Ranford went into the box and the ranks of the Press stiffened to cynical attention. He was too portentous. He was elaborately scientific. Before he had spoken three minutes the coroner was asking him to use language which the jury could understand.

"I will make the facts clear to them, sir, if I may take my own course. From the autopsy I have reached certain conclusions. In the first place, the man was undoubtedly dead before the locomotive passed over him. That is proved by the minor amount of hæmorrhage exhibited from his mutilation. A living person, I must tell the jury, bleeds freely. I had——"

"We all know that, Dr. Ranford," the coroner interrupted. "Is it your opinion he was killed by shock from the live rail on the line?"

"Pray allow me, sir." Ranford lifted up his voice. "I was about to say that I had to seek another cause for his death. Secondly, then, I observed a contused injury on the left temple, such as would be produced by a heavy blow from a blunt instrument. This——"

"Or a fall on the rail," said the coroner.

Ive and Reggie exchanged a swift glance. "They will do their stuff," Reggie sighed.

"No, sir," Ranford went on, "that is impossible."

"What do you say?" the coroner snorted, and the Press grinned.

"I say that this injury was certainly inflicted during life. Will you let me state the facts, sir? In the third place, then, I discovered scorching in the hair at the base of the skull and on the spine below."

"His head was burnt?" the coroner exclaimed and the Press goggled at Ranford's swelling importance.

Reggie spoke into the chief constable's ear. "Not so bad, your coroner. Innocent as a judge. Rubbin' it all in good and well." Lacy jerked away from him, and Reggie surveyed his possibilities.

Cloudesley did not conceal a keen interest, but he alone seemed to know what was coming next. Gower's unkempt head towered from the back benches to declare its usual superiority to everything and everybody with more than usual violence. Carter sat back frowning in the respectable calm of distress patiently endured but sharpened by bewilderment. Through the gravity of Ludlow broke some symptoms of surprise and doubt, but he shook his head at whispering from Christabel, he gave Ranford close, if incredulous attention. She could not be still, she tossed her black curls, her eyes gleamed this way and that, found Reggie, found Gower with a grimace and came back to Ranford and she gave a gasp of excitement as he went on:

"No, sir. Pray take note of my words. I did not say that the head was burnt. I said the skin and hair at the base of the skull were scorched."

"Very well," the coroner broke in again. "Scorching is not uncommon in deaths from electric shock, is it? And this man was lying where there were live rails, wasn't he?"

"The answer to both those questions is 'yes'," said Ranford with contempt. "But I have already stated that this man received a heavy blow before he died. In my opinion that blow induced loss of consciousness and the scorching was inflicted thereafter. I now come to my fourth point. The scorching was more severe than would be caused by the live rail current of 500 volts. Proceeding to examination of the brain I found——" he became incomprehensibly technical on cortex and circumvascular spaces and corpora striata.

"Yes, yes, yes. Will you now tell the jury what all that means?" the coroner demanded.

"It means, sir, that the condition of the brain was exactly the same as in men who have been killed by electrocution, that is by the application of a current of approximately 2,000 volts. I have thus established the certainty that Mr. Davis was first rendered unconscious by a violent assault and then submitted to a current of very high voltage which would kill him instantly. His body must therefore have been placed on the railway line after his death."

The Press wrote hard and with gusto. The public whispered together. But none of Reggie's possibilities except Christabel betrayed any emotion. To her outpourings Ludlow inclined an ear, but admonished her with lifted finger. The coroner made his notes more slowly than the reporters and then he read them over and blew his nose before he looked up at Ranford and asked in a tone of warning: "This is your opinion, doctor?"

"It is not a matter of opinion," Ranford told him. "The facts allow of no other interpretation."

"Where do you suggest that a current of this high power could be obtained?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, I am not here to make suggestions. My duty is simply to determine the cause of death. I have done so."

The coroner thought it out and looked over his spectacles at the jury. "Any questions?"

They whispered together. "Yes, sir," said the foreman, a grey ancient, with the stamp of the old soldier on him. "We'd like to know how the power wires could be put on Mr. Davis."

"I am giving medical evidence," Ranford was haughty.

Reggie glanced at Lucas, and Lucas stood up. "By your leave, sir, the police have a great deal more evidence to put in."

"Thank you, Dr. Ranford," the coroner dismissed him. "Now, Mr. Fortune, if you please."

Reggie took his stand, watched by the Press with humorous expectation, and all his possibilities except Christabel were grimly intent. Her excitement gave forth something like a giggle.

Reggie's round face was without any expression. It dropped out his evidence in slow time and the shortest words. He was with Dr. Ranford at the post-mortem, he agreed with Dr. Ranford, the man was killed by an electric current of high power.

The left side of Davis's head had been hit while alive, but not by a fall on the rails or any fall. The blow was too heavy for that. He had seen many cases of death from electric shock of many kinds. State of the body after death from touching a live rail was not like the state of Davis's body. The live rails must be ruled out. Their current was far too low to cause the damage done to his brain. That showed the changes found in death from contact with the high currents used in factories of well over a thousand volts. He had records of a number of like cases.

Electricity sent over the main wires at great tension was broken down for factory work to anything from a thousand to five thousand or so. From time to time men touched the factory wires by accident and were killed. But Davis had been struck some while before the current came into him, and it came through the back of the skull and the spine. Taking all that together, made it certain that he was murdered. He was stunned first and, while lying on his face, a current of well over a thousand volts was run into his brain. That could only have been managed by someone who had means to get at factory wires and knew how to use them.

One other point—the time of the murder. He had examined the food found in the stomach. Davis was

killed between two and three hours after his last meal, in which he ate veal and cheese.

Reggie stopped and there was a silence broken only by the scrabbling of pen and pencil and the fluttering of paper in the toil of the Press. He contemplated the goggling jury, he turned to the coroner again and murmured: "That is all I can tell you, sir."

"Thank you, thank you, Mr. Fortune," the coroner had become nervous. "You are quite clear?"

"Oh yes. Yes. I am." Reggie bowed and wandered back to his seat.

"If you please, sir," Lucas addressed the coroner briskly. "Would it be convenient to call Miss Carter now?"

Fay Carter was called. The consideration of Lucas had kept her out of court while this grim evidence was given. She came in timidly, conducted by a paternal policeman, wearing black, her pretty face shrunk and ashen white, her eyes red.

An inarticulate sound of angry disgust broke from Gower. The reporters looked back, the coroner ordered silence, the shocked public made sympathetic murmurs and Gower sneered at the universe.

Fay was given a chair, the coroner spoke suavities of encouragement and she nodded at him and gulped and looked at her lap.

She hardly found voice to stammer out answers to his simple questions. It was about half-past seven she went out with Davis. They went to the Knob Inn and had supper. She couldn't remember what they had. Yes, it might have been veal, perhaps, and some cheese. She didn't know what time it was. No, perhaps it couldn't have been before eight, but she wasn't sure. Afterwards they went up to the Knob, yes, that was what they went for.

Reggie glanced at Lucas. "If I may, sir," Lucas interrupted, "I should like to ask a question here. Was the bonfire lit before the lady got to the Knob?"

She stared at him. "Was it? I can't remember. I didn't notice."

"It's this little matter of the time, miss. Which way did you go from the inn to the Knob?"

"Why, we went through the combe. But I don't know how long it took."

"That's a pity. Well, going through the combe did you stop at all?"

"N—no," she hesitated. "Not really stop. Not any time."

"I mean to say, did you pick any flowers there?"

"Oh!" It was a tremulous cry. She hid her face and sobbed.

"I am most anxious not to distress you, Miss Carter," said the coroner. "But you want us to find out how this poor fellow died, don't you?"

She nodded, but she said nothing.

"Now, Miss Carter, tell me," Lucas went on gently enough. "Is it true you looked for St. John's wort down in the combe and found a flower—and gave it to Mr. Davis?"

"Yes," she whimpered. "I did. Oh, don't!"

"I only want to have this right. Was the flower in his buttonhole when you got to the Knob?"

"Well, of course."

"And when he left you that night——" she stopped him with a faint shriek—"now, please, Miss Carter—was he still wearing this flower?"

"Yes—oh no—I don't know. How can I? It was dark."

"The flower of St. John's wort you picked and gave him on Midsummer Eve—he wasn't likely to lose that, was he?"

Fay shook and sobbed.

"Please, please," the coroner interposed. "That is not a question, inspector, it's an argument."

"I beg your pardon, sir," Lucas was complacent.

"Now, Miss Carter," the coroner appealed to her. "Pray control yourself. I want you to tell me what terms you were on with Mr. Davis."

"Why, we'd been friends for ever so long," that answer came clearly, "there was nothing settled, but we both knew we were really engaged."

"I see. It is an old token to give St. John's wort on Midsummer Eve. That was understood between you?"

"Yes, that's why it's so dreadful."

"I quite appreciate your feelings. Now let me ask you this. Had anyone shown any dislike of your friendship for Mr. Davis?"

"Oh no, no one at all."

"Do you know of anyone who might be jealous?"

She blushed. She shook her head.

"Had Mr. Davis any enemies?"

"How could he?" she stammered. "He—he was so kind."

"Thank you. And now, how did you leave him?"

"Why, he was quite well! I don't understand."

"Just tell me where you saw him last and what time it was."

"He brought me home and we said good night and he went away. I don't know the time. It would be before midnight."

"How much before?"

"But I don't know. I didn't notice. I wasn't thinking."

"Which way did he go?"

"Why, out to the road, of course, that's the way to his house."

"And then you saw no more of him?"

She shook her head and bowed herself in a storm of crying.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Carter. I shan't trouble you any more."

The fatherly policeman helped her to rise, shepherded

her, dazed and stumbling, away. Most people watched her out of sight, and when she was gone there was a rustle of whispers. Gower started up and sat down again, staring hate at large. Christabel sped out. Ludlow looked after her with surprise. Carter only moved to put his hand over his eyes. And the reporters made some descriptive notes and lifted faces hungry for more.

The coroner cleared his throat and wiped his spectacles. Lucas rose. "I have to ask for an adjournment, sir. The police expect to produce further important evidence, and enquiries are not yet completed."

They agreed upon Saturday, and reporters condemned the eyes of inspector and coroner.

Lucas went out by the back door and held a conference with two of his men.

CHAPTER X

ENTR'ACTE

"MY DEAR CARTER," Ludlow put a hand on Carter's bowed shoulder as the little gossiping crowd outside made way for them, "this is a distressing affair. I hope Mrs. Ludlow may call on your daughter. But you'll give her my deepest sympathy, won't you? A cruel ordeal. If there is anything we can do, of course you'll tell me."

"Thank you, Mr. Ludlow." Carter grasped his other hand and was jostled by Gower pushing past.

As Ludlow went on to the row of cars, Christabel, sitting in her red two-seater, beckoned him. "You shouldn't have come, child." He gave sympathetic rebuke. "Are you fit to drive yourself?"

"Fed and fit to drive over that inspector, the greasy bully!" she said fiercely. "And his pussy-cat coroner. Gosh, am I sick? Believe me! Do you know, they wouldn't let me go give that kid a hand after they'd done her down? You ought to have the hide off your police, Mr. Ludlow."

"What a swift young person it is!" he smiled. "You'll come to know our police better. Don't make a noise at them. It wouldn't be good for you."

She started her engine and swirled away.

As Reggie came out with Ive, a plump young man of truculent self-assertion, one of the star reporters, got in his way. "So you're going big again, Mr. Fortune. This is front-page stuff."

Reggie's eyes opened wide in shocked surprise. "Press?" he murmured. "Oh no, no. Please." He slid by to his car and Ive and he drove off.

"Very correct, Mr. Crummles," said Ive.

"What? My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap!" Reggie was hurt. "I do not advertise. Havin' no use for same."

"Of course not. It's quite unnecessary. Mr. Crummles only wondered how these things get into the papers."

"Not kind. Not fair. Your error. I didn't want to be in the nasty case. Won't make me popular. Wait and see." Reggie drove on through the lorries of the high-road in a fantasia of speed which kept Ive dumb with apprehension.

Christabel Biggs was also driving fast, but she went up the lane which led to the church and the hills. She hooted at a man who strode along the middle of the road. He neither looked round nor gave way and she slowed and crammed alongside him, off wheels in the hedge, calling: "Are you tired o' life? Golly, it's the same old jay-walker."

"Have you killed anyone else?" Gower snapped at her.

"What's the idea, baby?" She kept pace with him. "You give yourself a raw deal. I say, why did you come to that rotten inquest?"

"Go on, drive yourself to the devil!" Gower cried.

"Running very hot, aren't you? You're liking that poor kid?"

Gower turned on his heel and strode back.

"You silly ass," she cried after him, but the lane gave her no chance to turn, she was defeated. She bit her lip and drove on.

Where there was a widening by Noke's garage she slowed again and crawled to the entry as if she meant to go in or use it for turning. But whatever she had in mind, after study of the place she did not stop.

At a sober pace she came to the church, loitered to look at it and look across the village green. There was no one to be seen anywhere, no movement but the slow passing

of cloud shadows over the sunlit slopes above and a winking flash from the windows of Miramar.

She sent her car on up the lane to the Knob Inn. Thus delaying, she was not far in front of Cloudesley's veteran saloon-of-all-work.

The lounge of the inn was empty. She thrust at a bell and flopped down. Bunyard looked round a door wiping his mouth. "Hey!" she called. "Dry martini! Quick!"

"It can't be done, miss," Bunyard sidled towards her. "Out of hours. Serving soft drinks only."

"Have a heart!"

"Orders is orders, miss. Nice cup o' cawfee or tea?"

"Coffee, blast you." But then Cloudesley arrived and she turned on him and Bunyard stood to attention. "SOS, captain. I'll die on your hands if I don't have a cocktail."

"Too bad. Dora is Dora. We'll put that on your tombstone, Miss Biggs."

"I swear you're giving yourself one."

"You wrong me cruelly. Mine's tea." At which Bunyard rolled out.

"What a hero!" Christabel flung herself back. "I say, wasn't that the foulest ever?"

"Where are we now? Still on the drink?"

"Oh, come down! You were there. I saw you with the balmy high-brow."

"Pardon me, ma'am. You didn't. No high-brows in my simple life. Are you still asking after Comrade Gower?"

She laughed. "Cat to your dog, is he? I don't blame you."

Cloudesley shook his solemn head. "Sorry to disappoint. Cats are interesting to dogs."

"Temper!" said she. "All hot and bothered."

"You flatter me, ma'am."

Bunyard came with a tray. She poured out Cloudesley's tea for him, she said: "Cheerio" and sipped her coffee.

"Wasn't that inquest lousy?"

"Not drawing-room stuff. Attendance wasn't compulsory."

"For men only? Don't do the Rip Van Winkle on me. I'm not a nice young person. What do you know about the poor kid they grilled?"

"Everybody likes Miss Carter. Everybody's sorry for her."

"Are you doing anything about it?"

"Which is that?"

"Gosh! Why play poker? You know very well what they're trying to fix on her—she vamped that Davis fellow so someone could do him in."

"You're telling me," said Cloudesley.

"Who's the man they're after?"

"I can't help you, ma'am."

"Are you one of the everybody who likes her?" she cried.

"Yes, I am. I liked Davis too."

"So you stand out? Good man!" she laughed contempt. She started up and rang the bell and paid the bill and sped away.

The dog Dingo came in waggling, but on inspection of Cloudesley's face considered the moment inopportune for more, lay down and gazed up at him with eyes as solemn as his own.

They were still in the same position when Reggie and Ive, having finished a meagre meal in Merchester, went to confer with the chief constable.

He gave them a welcome of nervous excitement. "Now, gentlemen, now, pray sit down. I have news for you. There has been a fresh development."

"Oh yes," Reggie made himself comfortable. "Where is that?"

"From Inspector Lucas's investigations. This is his telephoned report." It was read to them in an undertone of secrecy as if all the world were listening, punctuated

by glances of emphasis and pride. "This appears to me of the first importance, gentlemen."

"Good man, Lucas," Reggie murmured.

"Quite a notable piece of work," said Ive. "You are going to make a big sensation, major. The Mershire police will be famous."

The chief constable flushed. "I suppose that is so. I deplore it myself. To my mind publicity is the bane of criminal investigation."

"Oh," Reggie moaned. "I wouldn't say that. No."

Ive directed at him a sardonic smile. "It hasn't exactly destroyed Mr. Fortune."

"I may take it you are satisfied we are on the right lines?" the chief constable asked.

Reggie waited for Ive to answer. "Certainly," said Ive. "You could have taken no other course, and your inspector's work is admirable. You have now a strong probability of proving a charge of murder. I anticipate success."

"Thank you, thank you," the chief constable nodded. "That was my own opinion. I am glad to be fortified by your judgment. It is, of course, a painful case."

"Oh yes. Yes," Reggie murmured. "Sad world. As you say. However. Must go on. You'll have results. . . ."

The sun was low in the west when he came back to the Knob Inn. Bathed and changed, he found the dining-room all but empty, and Cloudesley was not there to serve the wine.

After dinner he wandered out into the garden and lay in a long chair taking the last of the sunshine. Then the dog Dingo came and sniffed his legs critically and decided that the man was worthy to pull his ears and had it done to his satisfaction.

"You're an exceptional man, sir," said Cloudesley's voice behind him. "Dingo don't like men."

"A thorough gentleman," Reggie murmured, and rubbed at the gentlemanly ears and Dingo rumbled

satisfaction. "Ladies only. Flattered to be an exception. I am simply human." He laid his head back to look up at Cloudesley. "Do you mind my stayin' on?"

"I'm very glad to have you, sir. The longer the better."

"I wonder. What's the state of public feelin'?"

"There isn't any. We don't have a public in Hurst. We're all odds and ends."

"And your end?"

"As you ask me, I think the police gave Fay Carter a raw deal. But what you're after has me beat."

"Yes. Very proper answer," Reggie murmured. "What would you be after?"

"It's not my pidgin. I'm no policeman."

"Proud of that? Well, well. We have our uses, Cloudesley."

"You're welcome," said Cloudesley sharply, and strode away. Dingo started up from Reggie's hand and shook himself and followed.

Reggie watched them vanish with a twist of a smile which was not amiable. Then he turned to gaze through the dying sunlight. A flash came over the trees from the windows of Mrs. Carson's villa. Farther away the brown cupolas of Ludlow's house stood gilt in the glow from the west.

"All odds and ends," he murmured Cloudesley's phrase. "No. What the sailor said isn't evidence. We are not divided, all one body we."

CHAPTER XI

WHO?

WHEN THE CORONER came into the hall on Saturday morning it was crowded and noisy. All the diverse elements in the population of Hurst, roused to curiosity by the first act of the inquest, made an eager struggling medley to hear what the second act would produce, and among them the people of importance were submerged. A larger company of reporters and very special correspondents crushed on one another, and told each other diverse tales of what the story would be.

Reggie was late. He made his way to the seats of authority and I've directed his eyes to a small, plump man with a grey beard who had been given a chair and a table of his own under the coroner's desk. "Josh Clunk." I've spoke without moving his lips. "Wind up."

"Well, well," Reggie murmured. "This is goin' it." For Joshua Clunk is a solicitor of fame in criminal practice. And Mr. Clunk, for all his smug complacency, was not unobservant of these attentions. He bowed to Reggie and showed a range of teeth.

The coroner rebuked the noise, the coroner swelled importance and called a string of witnesses to swear that they had looked for flowers of St. John's wort on Midsummer Eve and found none, but they had seen Mr. Davis with a flower in his buttonhole at the bonfire, seen no one else so decorated, "only him had the luck." "Lucky, indeed, gentlemen!" the coroner remarked to the jury. "Call Mr. Scott Carter."

Carter came in, gravely correct of demeanour and took the oath. "Now, Mr. Carter," the coroner was brusque. "You are the proprietor of the Jove Radio Works. What was Harold Davis's position with you?"

"He had a small share in the business, sir. One tenth to be exact. I gave him that. He came to me as a technician and I found his services useful in works management."

"Very well. You were aware that he had an affection for your daughter?"

"I had lately thought there might be something of the kind. But Davis was shy and reserved and my daughter is young."

"You did not object?"

"Not at all. I had a high opinion of Davis."

"Is the jury to understand you encouraged the attachment?"

"I should never influence my daughter in such a matter."

"But you allowed her to go with Davis to the Midsummer bonfire. You know that has a significance in this district?"

"With some people," said Carter contemptuously.

"In fact, it had, with Davis and your daughter. She has told us she found a flower of St. John's wort and gave it him. That amounts to an engagement here, doesn't it?"

"I have no doubt they took it so."

"Your daughter said Davis brought her back home. Did you see them then?"

"No, sir. I go to bed soon after ten, as I am in the works very early in the morning. I did not even hear them return."

"You went to bed at ten?" The coroner emphasized incredulity.

"About that time. I put out my light before half-past ten. I heard nothing afterwards."

"Your own relations with Davis were friendly?"

"Most friendly."

"You had no business difficulty with him?"

"None at all."

"Have you been contemplating any change in the Jove Radio Works?"

"My business is expanding largely."

"I am asking you if you intended any change which would affect Davis's position?"

"None, sir."

"He was your technical adviser, wasn't he? Was he in agreement with your plans for—er—expansion?"

"There was complete agreement. He was not my adviser. I have absolute control."

"Wasn't Davis working on new designs for you?"

"I am always engaged on new design. I had Davis's assistance. The ideas have always been mine."

Mr. Clunk stood up. "I object, Mr. Coroner. These questions are irrelevant and out of all order. They have no purpose but to injure Mr. Carter's business."

"Sit down, sir," the coroner was wrath. "I conduct this enquiry."

"And most improperly," Mr. Clunk squeaked.

"If you consider, as Mr. Carter's legal adviser, that he might incriminate himself by answering a question, you may tell him so. I shall ask him what is required to establish the truth of Davis's death."

"Don't cast prejudice," Mr. Clunk hissed, and was told to be silent.

"Josh is rattled," said Ive out of the corner of his mouth.

"Not bad, this coroner." But Reggie was dumb.

"Now, Mr. Carter," the coroner went on, "tell the jury whether you have in your works wires carrying a current of over a thousand volts."

"Certainly. I have motors operated at from twelve hundred to two thousand. That is a common practice."

"Those power wires are low and easily accessible?"

"No, sir. They enter the shops at about ten feet from the ground."

"It would be easy enough for a skilled person to connect them with a man's body, if he were unconscious?"

"I don't know how."

"Really? But you know all about the use of electric power?"

"I am not an expert."

"You have qualifications as an electrical engineer?"

"My work has always been on wireless design, a very different thing. Davis dealt with the power equipment."

"Very well. The jury will hear an expert. Now, Mr. Carter, you have told us you were in bed by half-past ten on the night of Davis's death. Who was in your works after that time?"

"No one as far as I know. No one should have been. The works were locked up at seven."

"You would be surprised to hear that lights were seen in the works about midnight?"

"I am astonished at the suggestion. It is, of course, possible that someone may have broken in."

"But you saw no traces of that next morning? Nothing had been taken?"

"No, sir, not to my knowledge."

"You have a private entry from the grounds of your house to the works. Will you swear that you did not take Davis into the works after he brought your daughter home?"

"Mr. Carter has sworn that already," Mr. Clunk cried.

"Certainly. I will swear it again if you wish," said Carter. "But the question is ridiculous. I should not go back to the works at midnight. Of course Davis would not have consented to go."

"We have medical evidence that he was stunned by a blow before he was killed by a current of high power,"

the coroner remarked. "Now, Mr. Carter, where was your motor-car that night?"

"In my garage."

"When did you take it to Mr. Noke's garage?"

"I am not sure of the date—a day or two afterwards."

"How odd that you can't tell the jury! It was the next day, wasn't it?"

"Possibly."

"Why did you take it to Mr. Noke's?"

"The car had been due for overhaul some time."

"Wasn't there some damage to one of the wings?"

"The car is two years old. I dare say the wings were scratched—nothing of importance."

"Have you visited Davis's house since his death? Or his office?"

"No, sir. Neither. I have no key to his house. I sent my secretary to his office for files which were needed."

"Doesn't it seem strange to you that there are no private papers of his to be found?"

"I know nothing of his affairs. He may have kept papers at the bank."

"But he didn't," said the coroner. "That is all, Mr. Carter."

"I beg your pardon." Mr. Clunk started up. "Pray, Mr. Carter, tell the jury, is yours the only factory in Hurst which uses electrical power?"

"Certainly not. There are several equipped in the same way."

"How much was Mr. Davis drawing from your business? £2,000 last year? Thank you. You have a letter from him thanking you for your generosity in giving him a partnership. Pass it to the coroner. Be good enough to read that out, sir." It was read. The thanks were stiff, but it ended with a hope that Davis's association with Jove Radio might long continue.

"The jury will see that there was the best feeling on both sides," Mr. Clunk beamed. "Now, Mr. Carter, I must ask this: have you ever heard of Davis having enemies?"

"I should not be justified in making accusations," said Carter austerely. "Davis was not a man to complain. I did gather that he considered a trivial dispute in the works some time ago was fomented from outside to make trouble for him. I am unable to give you any names."

"And it is also possible that someone may have been jealous of your daughter's engagement to him?"

"I suppose it is possible," Carter answered with obvious reluctance. "I cannot allow that my daughter is in any way involved."

"Quite so, quite," said Mr. Clunk and turned to the coroner. "Do you call any more witnesses, sir?"

"Sit down, sir. You may go, Mr. Carter," the coroner asserted his dignity and some of the revellers of the bonfire swore to seeing lights in the wireless factory as they came home near midnight. Two bright young things, later than the rest, had seen a car issuing from Carter's drive. Mr. Clunk's facetious cross-examination did not shake them.

An electrical engineer explained the possibility of any man who knew a little about industrial electricity and the layout of the Jove Radio Works, applying there a lethal current to the unconscious Davis. Having obtained from him the admission that the like qualifications would have enabled a man to kill Davis at the other factories of Hurst, Mr. Clunk sat down and put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and grinned at the coroner with all his teeth.

All this while Reggie had shown no interest in coroner or Clunk or witnesses. With a blank face, with drowsy eyes, he watched the Press and the public. It was plain that the reporters thought the examination of Carter good strong stuff, it could be guessed that they were dramatising his cold respectability and the coroner's attack. What the

jury thought, if they did think, their stolidity gave no sign. The dense ranks of the other inhabitants of Hurst were obviously suffering from many different emotions. What one whispered another rejected, but they were all excited. Hugh Gower, flinging himself about with ejaculations of rage or contempt, drew much eager notice. Crushed into a corner behind Ludlow, Christabel bobbed at this side and that of his grey head and talked to his ear. But she did not interest him, he sat impassive, giving the witnesses grave, judicial attention. If Cloudesley was in court, Reggie could not see him.

Inspector Lucas began his evidence. He had sought Davis's private papers at his house, at his office, in the works and at the bank, and there were none.

Upon the finding of the body he went immediately to the railway crossing and saw that the gate showed scraping with black paint as from a car having been turned there. The marks were quite fresh. Proceeding to the Jove Radio Works he found, just outside the door of the office, a flower of St. John's wort with broken stem. It could not have been picked many hours. He produced it.

Subsequently, from information received, he visited Noke's garage.

"When was this visit?" Mr. Clunk squeaked.

"On Thursday, after the adjournment of the inquest. I found there Mr. Carter's black car. I was informed it had been brought by Mr. Carter the morning after Davis's death. The wings were freshly repainted. I examined the interior of the car. I observed, caught on the base of the rear door on the near side, a portion of grey flannel, similar to the suit worn by Mr. Davis. I produce this with the coat of his suit for comparison. The trousers were all torn to bits. It will be seen the coat is also torn."

The cramped public strained their necks and started up to stare at the exhibits handed to the coroner, and from him to the jury.

Lucas cleared his throat. "Furthermore, sir, on the puckers of the pocket of the same door, I found a certain substance which I removed. In my opinion this is a piece of human skin with dark hair that has been scorched, as on the back of Mr. Davis's head."

"Your opinion!" Mr. Clunk gave a cackle of laughter. "Is this policeman giving medical evidence, Mr. Coroner?"

"There will be medical evidence about it," said Lucas, unperturbed. "I am now stating what I found. Here it is." He passed to the coroner a box which contained the gruesome relic, and the reporters as well as the public struggled for a glimpse of it.

The coroner's officer roared for order. The coroner peered into the box. "This would appear to be human skin," he announced, and sent it on to the jury, who gloated over it. "Have you anything more to put to the court, inspector?"

"No, sir. That is all," Lucas showed his satisfaction.

"Indeed it's not," Mr. Clunk started up. "You have a great deal more to tell the jury, inspector. Were you the first policeman who saw this car in Mr. Noke's garage?"

"I was not. I sent a sergeant to verify that it was there."

"Why didn't you let the jury know that before?"

"Because the sergeant didn't examine it and I did. He only asked Mr. Noke if Mr. Carter's car was there."

"I put it to you that the sergeant was shown the car."

"He was. And then he came away to tell me."

"Quite so." Mr. Clunk grinned unpleasantly. "He told you that he saw nothing suspicious about it?"

"He did not. He simply told me Noke had the car for repair."

"So he didn't see anything suspicious?"

"It wasn't his business to look for anything."

"Don't try to deceive the jury. Your sergeant saw the car on Thursday morning and he found nothing of what you say you found. That's the truth isn't it?"

"The sergeant didn't examine the car."

"Quite. He was forbidden by his inspector. And then, in the afternoon, the inspector came to the car and examined it quite alone. Isn't that the real truth?"

"No. I had a man with me."

"Yes, indeed! To see you were not observed in your examination. And so you made these wonderful discoveries." Mr. Clunk lifted up his voice. "You're on your oath, sir. Isn't it the fact there was nothing in the car till you came to it?"

"No, it's not the fact," Lucas retorted. "It's a lie."

Mr. Clunk turned to the coroner. "Pray tell this—this person to treat the court with respect."

"You are impertinent, sir," snapped the coroner. "You put a statement to the witness. He has a right to say that it was false."

"And the jury have a right to hear the ways of the police exposed. I am not to be silenced, Mr. Coroner. Now, inspector, answer this. You had access to the dead man's clothes and the dead man's body. Is that true?"

"I saw him in the mortuary, if that's what you mean."

"You had the chance to take scraps of clothes and skin away."

"No, I hadn't. After the doctors took over, I never went near him."

"You had plenty of time before, hadn't you?" said Mr. Clunk, and sat down.

The coroner glared at him. "Do you suggest that the inspector took these fragments of cloth and skin from the dead man and placed them in the car himself?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Clunk blandly.

"That is a charge of the fabrication of false evidence. There could be no graver charge against a police officer."

"I make it," said Mr. Clunk.

"What have you to say, inspector?"

"There's no sort of truth in it," Lucas had recovered his temper. "I never laid a hand on the man's body. I found these things in the car, as I said. It's just silly to pretend I put 'em there. I have nothing to gain however the case goes. My duty is just to look for what evidence there is."

"Yes, yes, that is a complete denial," the coroner nodded, and recalled Dr. Ranford.

Ranford came with his most important manner. The piece of skin produced was handed to him by Inspector Lucas. It had a faint smell of leather such as might be expected from contact with the leather upholstery of a car. It was certainly human skin and shrivelled from scorching. The roots of dark hair were numerous on it. The skin scorched on the back of Davis's neck was exactly similar. Portions of the skin there were missing when he first examined the body. The scorching was such that the skin would easily be detached by rubbing against any substance. If the body had been carried in a car after death he would expect some of the damaged skin to be detached.

"That's a guess, isn't it, doctor?" Mr. Clunk smiled.

"No, sir, it is a reasoned inference."

"The medical language for guessing. When did you give the inspector your guess? Before he handed you the skin or after?"

"I gave him my opinion after I had made the most thorough examination of this portion of skin. I do not offer conjectures. The suggestion is ludicrous."

"We have certainly heard some ludicrous evidence," Mr. Clunk tittered. "You said bits of the poor fellow's skin were missing when you first saw the body. The inspector saw it before you, didn't he? What is your reasoned inference from that, doctor?"

Ranford also smiled. "You may not be aware that you are attempting to mislead the jury. Inspector Lucas did

not see the body before me. We arrived at the railway station together. He was not present at any stage of the medical examination."

But Mr. Clunk was not disconcerted. "Really, doctor, you're not retained to protect the police. Tell the jury the whole truth. The inspector examined the railway line where the man was run over. If any skin was rubbed off, wouldn't he have found it there?"

"Your argument is childish," said Ranford. "Obviously he would not find on the railway what was rubbed off in getting the body there."

"So you assume the police must be right whatever they do and arrange your evidence to support them?" Mr. Clunk cried. "The jury will see it's worth nothing."

Then the coroner exploded upon him. "The jury will be directed by me, sir. You are not here to make speeches or to insult witnesses. You——"

"I am here to see that justice is done," Mr. Clunk interrupted. "Are we to have any more of these police witnesses?"

"You will behave yourself or leave the court, sir," the coroner glared, and Mr. Clunk looked up at him with the disdain of a cat.

"Josh overplaying his hand," I've said to Reggie.

"It could be. Yes." Reggie was watching the gusto of the labours of the Press.

The coroner turned to Lucas and Lucas said, "That is all the evidence, sir."

"No, no, my friend," Mr. Clunk giggled. "You'll not leave the case so. Don't you call Mr. Noke?"

Lucas gave his answer to the coroner. "The police are not aware of anything Mr. Noke can add——" I've shot a whisper at him. "But of course we have no objection," he added slowly.

"You have been well advised to change your mind," Mr. Clunk squeaked. "The jury will note that you did

not mean them to hear what Mr. Noke could tell them. I request you to call him, Mr. Coroner."

Noke pushed through the crowd, and shambled forward and grunted out the oath and gave the jury a knowing grin as a man and a brother. But then his dark heavy face hardened and he watched Mr. Clunk intently.

"Now, sir." Mr. Clunk's eyes and teeth gleamed. "Let the jury hear all you know of this car at your garage."

"All right. Mr. Carter, he always sends his car to my shop when she needs anything. He left her o' Wednesday forenoon for to be overhauled and made good. I went over her myself. She wanted reboring, new condenser and points and touching up the body. I went over her thorough. I'll take my oath there was no dirt nor nothing inside." The public swayed in confused noises.

"Dear me," Mr. Clunk tittered. "Now, now, Mr. Noke, you've heard Inspector Lucas swear that on Thursday afternoon he found a piece of flannel in a door and a piece of skin on a pocket?"

"I have. I don't say as Mr. Lucas didn't. What I do say is there wasn't neither there o' Wednesday when Mr. Carter brought the car. There wasn't nothing inside at all."

"You're quite sure?" Mr. Clunk asked, one word at a time.

"You take it I am. I spend my life going over cars."

"So if Inspector Lucas did find this flannel and this skin, the articles were put in the car after it came into your garage."

"They must have been."

"Inspector Lucas examined the car by himself and he didn't tell you he'd found anything?"

"That's right. He had her in the paint shop. And he said nothing to me."

Mr. Clunk turned. "Any questions by the police?" Ive whispered to Lucas. "Oh, by all means get fresh instructions," Mr. Clunk squeaked.

"About the wings of this car, Mr. Noke," said Lucas. "Had they any marks of fresh scraping?"

"The near side wings were scraped front and back. Nothing much."

"You were standing by the shop when I examined the car?"

"There or thereabouts."

"You could see me, couldn't you?"

"More or less."

"Do you say I put anything into the car?"

"I do not. Nor I wouldn't think it of you, Mr. Lucas."

"Thank you," Lucas began sarcastically. "Now you——" Ive pulled his coat. "That's all."

"Come, Mr. Noke," the coroner was severe, "how do you suggest these articles could have been placed in the car?"

"That's not for me to say. I don't know."

"Isn't it probable they were there all the time and you overlooked them?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, it is not. I don't make mistakes."

"Then you're not like other men," the coroner told him. "You may stand down."

"Not yet," Mr. Clunk objected. "Tell me, Mr. Noke, while the car was in your shops could anyone have put things into it?"

Noke took time to think before he answered, "Might have. The car wasn't locked up being no reason for why. I have a mort of folks coming and going."

"Oh indeed." Mr. Clunk smiled, and looked down at his notes.

Ive spoke to Reggie's ear. "Josh got what he didn't want with that one."

But Mr. Clunk went on, beaming. "Someone might have tampered with the car before the inspector saw it?"

"Yes, a bloke might have played tricks."

"Very well. Now——"

"It's not at all well, Mr. Clunk," the coroner interrupted. "Your conduct is recklessly irresponsible. First you accuse the police of fabricating evidence, then you abandon that charge to accuse someone else."

"I am doing my duty, sir," Mr. Clunk's chest swelled. "I am here to protect an innocent man. The evidence against him is plainly false and fabricated. You cannot silence questions to discover the truth. Now, now, Mr. Noke. You were at the bonfire when this poor fellow Davis came there with Miss Carter wearing her true-love flower?" Mr. Clunk blew his nose, trumpeting emotion.

"I was," said Noke.

"Did you see anyone interfere with them?"

"I don't know what you mean, interfere."

"I mean anyone who showed surprise or unkind feeling or malice or jealousy?"

"I'm not to say things like that. Mr. Gower, he was chipping Mr. Davis about the lady."

"In a kindly way?" Mr. Clunk dragged out the words.

"I wouldn't call it kind, myself. Mr. Davis, he didn't like it."

"Oh indeed. Would you call Mr. Gower a rival for the lady's affections?"

"Beg pardon, sir, I'd rather leave that to Mr. Gower. I've seen him going with Miss Carter."

"And that night Mr. Gower saw her acknowledging Mr. Davis as her fiancé?"

"That's right. And that's all I know."

"Thank you, Mr. Noke," Mr. Clunk sat down.

A shout shook the hall. "This is a foul, damned trick! Now you'll hear me!" Gower fought his way through the crowd and rushed up to the coroner's table.

"Who are you, sir?" the coroner glared.

"I'm Hugh Gower."

"If you had any evidence to give you should have said so before. Take the oath, sir."

"Your silly oaths mean nothing to me."

"If the oath does not bind your conscience you must affirm."

"Any fool of a form you like. It makes no difference. I respect my own mind, not the hocus pocus of a court." He sneered through the affirmation.

"Now, sir, what have you to tell the jury? Do you——"

"I'll tell them my own way. Then they'll have the thing clear. What the man Noke said is more or less true. The tricks that attorney played with it are lies. I did chaff poor little Davis when he came up to the bonfire with Fay Carter. Malice—jealousy"—Gower laughed loud—"that's the invention of a lawyer's filthy mind. I liked the Davis fellow, he was as honest as milk and about as strong. He had a mind and no notion of using it for himself. He was a slave, slave of the factory and its owner. About Fay Carter, you've tortured her in this damned court already. To let this attorney drag her through the mud is bestial." The coroner's shocked rebuke was hardly heard as Gower roared on. "She's not a woman. She's a child. She doesn't know what a man is. Davis was no more jealous of me than the table is, nor I of him, poor devil. I laughed at them on the Knob. I'm sorry for that now. I never saw them again. But this is all a cheat. The child was used to catch Davis so that he could be murdered for the profit of the factory, and your respectable court is worked to cover it up by letting scoundrels pretend she's a loose woman."

"Hold your tongue, sir," the coroner took his chance as Gower stopped for breath. "This is not evidence, this is abuse. You are——"

"It's the truth," Gower laughed. "And every honest man here knows it."

"Leave the court, sir," the coroner cried.

"Yes, I will. I've exposed you," Gower stalked out theatrically in a heavy silence with all eyes upon him.

"I think the jury will know how much to believe of that young gentleman," Mr. Clunk's voice rose shrill.

The coroner drank a glass of water and fussed over his notes while rustling and whispering rose. His officer shouted for silence, and he arranged himself portentously to sum up.

But he showed a clear head, he was plain and he was brief.

The jury must be quite calm, they were not to care about any wild talk, they had nothing to do with feelings for or against anyone, they would just think of the facts put to them.

It was clear from what the doctors said that Davis was killed by a high power current. So he was not killed on the railway. He was put there after death to conceal how he had been killed. That meant he was murdered.

Where was he murdered, then? Only factories used the high current required. He had been near the Jove Radio factory about the time that he was killed. A flower such as he had been wearing was picked up next morning by the Jove office. Other people searching for such flowers the night before said that only Davis obtained one. The jury would be aware the season was late and St. John's wort hardly in bloom anywhere. All this made a strong probability that Davis was on the factory premises after he took Miss Carter home. Several witnesses had told them that lights were burning there after midnight.

None of this evidence had been disputed. The jury would naturally conclude that he was murdered at the Jove Radio factory.

Then who murdered him? They had upon that some conflict of evidence. Mr. Scott Carter swore that he and Davis were on the best terms, that Davis was valuable to the factory, that he approved Davis as a suitor for his daughter.

He also stated that he was in bed and heard nothing of the return of his daughter and Davis.

But Inspector Lucas told them that no private papers of Davis were left, either in his house or in his office, a remarkable thing. The inspector had found that a black car scraped its wings on the gate of the railway crossing, and Mr. Carter had taken his black car the day after the death to Noke's garage, where Noke saw scraping on its wings. This evidence also was unchallenged. Difficulty arose over the inspector's further statement that he had found flannel and scorched skin in the car.

They saw for themselves the flannel might well have been torn from Davis's clothes. They must accept the medical evidence that the skin had probably been detached from the electric burn on Davis's neck.

On the other hand, they would take into account the evidence of William Noke. He was a witness of credit, he swore that the flannel and skin were not in the car when Mr. Carter brought it to his garage.

This contradiction must be carefully considered. They would give no weight to the suggestion of Mr. Carter's solicitor that the articles were placed in the car by the police. It was a reckless charge, it was promptly withdrawn, and in its place an allegation was put forward that Davis had been murdered by a jealous rival who sought to avert suspicion by providing false evidence.

A measure of support was given to this by William Noke when he told of witnessing something like a quarrel between Davis and the man Hugh Gower at the bonfire. They would also have in mind Gower's disgraceful outburst. They might well think him an ill-conditioned and violent young man.

But they must not forget that Miss Carter herself told them no one had shown any dislike of her friendship for Davis, and he had no enemies. She could not have said that if Gower was Davis's rival for her affections.

A full examination of the evidence therefore should

decide the jury to dismiss this theory that the murder was a crime of jealousy and the flannel and the skin placed in the car by the murderer to divert suspicion from himself to Mr. Carter. No doubt William Noke was honest in his statement that he saw nothing in the car. But he was a garage proprietor surveying it for repairs not for traces of a crime. He might well overlook what was found by Inspector Lucas, a trained detective officer of long experience.

The articles were small, as the jury had seen. But they were of decisive importance. Davis was certainly killed in a factory. Finding of his flower at the Jove factory proved that he was there shortly before death, when lights were seen there. To remove his dead body thence to the railway crossing, in order that he might seem to have been killed on the line, a car was necessary. The crossing gates had been scraped by a car and Mr. Carter's car was scraped. In Mr. Carter's car fragments of his clothes and his skin were found.

The jury could not doubt that they had before them a case of murder. They must do their duty without fear or favour in considering whether the evidence showed who was the guilty person.

"That will do," said Ive as the jury retired.

"Fair-minded man. Did it all for the best," Reggie murmured, and with dreamy eyes surveyed the court.

Carter had gone out. Noke stood at the back, rejecting efforts to make him talk, and his heavy dark face was sullen. Christabel bobbed and chattered behind Ludlow, but he, with an elbow in one hand and his chin in the other, answered little, maintained an aloof, judicial calm. Mr. Clunk's shining yellow cheeks moved in the suction of a sweet, as he looked up at the roof with the satisfaction of self-conscious virtue. . . .

The jury came back. "Sir," said the foreman, "our verdict is, sir, as Mr. Davis died of electricity, but there's no knowing what way he got it."

Reporters in muttered ejaculations were the first to understand what that meant. Then the public chattered like rooks.

The coroner called angrily for silence and glared at the jury. "You cannot decide how he was killed?"

"That's right, sir. There's nought to show, as we see."

"Do you understand you are giving me an open verdict? You actually leave it uncertain whether his death was accidental!"

"Ay, sir. So it is," said the foreman stubbornly. "We're all agreed on that."

"Very well. I have to take your verdict. I must tell you, it is without meaning," the coroner answered and the Press surged up to be first out, and confused noise filled the hall.

"Give me a British jury on the day of judgment," said I've to Reggie.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. As they filed out after the stormy melancholy of the chief constable, Mr. Clunk tripped up to them.

"A most interesting day, Mr. Fortune," he chirped.

"Yes, I thought that," Reggie's eyelids drooped. "May I say—very ingenious, Mr. Clunk. Thanks very much."

"You're always so pleasant," Mr. Clunk tittered.

In the road outside, the plump, assertive special correspondent who had accosted Reggie after the first day of the inquest bumped into him again and grinned. "Hallo, hallo, Mr. Fortune! We have no fish only kippers! So what?"

"Oh no, no. Please." Reggie was shocked. "Why? Why?" and passed on to his car.

CHAPTER XII

CONFERENCE

IN HIS OFFICE at Merchester the chief constable was fretting and fuming to Lucas. I've come in, sardonic and nonchalant as ever. "Ha! Very kind of you to join us," the chief constable said bitterly. "Shall we see Mr. Fortune?"

"In a moment. He stopped to send a telegram."

"Sending the good news, I suppose!"

"Don't take it to heart, major. Juries will be juries."

Lacy snorted. "I don't blame the jury. I blame myself."

Reggie came in to hear this lamentation. "My dear major! Oh, my dear major! Shouldn't do that," he protested.

"I was wrong to rely on the advice which you gentlemen gave me. You told me, I remember, that the Mershire police would be famous. We are indeed. You told me to anticipate success in proving a charge of murder. Now the whole case is ruined, and we shall all be made ridiculous or worse."

I've smiled. "A common penalty for doing the right thing, major. You will survive."

"I'm not thinking of myself," Lacy cried, "I'm thinking of the reputation of the police and of my duty to see justice is done."

"There is that, yes," Reggie murmured.

"Surely it's clear now that we were wrong to press the charge of murder against Carter at the inquest on the evidence we had. Now——"

"Oh no. No. Contrariwise. You had to."

"Do you tell me we have any chance now of proving him guilty?"

"Difficult question. Not a good chance."

"I agree," said Ive. "These mindless juries are a curse. But in the face of that verdict it is not a case for prosecution."

"Of course it isn't. I find no fault with the jury myself. They were bound to accept Noke's evidence, and that destroyed the whole case against Carter. Everyone will agree we treated him shamefully."

"Sir!" Lucas protested. "I must say that's not fair to me."

"No. Not fair. Not rational," said Reggie. "Think, major. Noke's evidence—neither skin nor flannel in the car when Carter left it with him. Possibility number one—Lucas put the articles there. You don't believe that. Little man Clunk didn't believe it himself. Possibility number two—Noke was lying. That could be. I should say Noke lies well and would lie hard to save a friend or hurt an enemy. Possibility number three—somebody else put the relics there. Little man Clunk's second thought. Rather a good thought. What's it mean? Two alternatives. The wild man Gower—or somebody else anonymous—did the murder and arranged to hang Carter for it. Or Carter was the murderer and Carter—or a kind friend collaboratin'—planted the relics in the car after Noke had gone over it so Noke could swear they were faked and smash the case against Carter. That's the alternative I like."

"Good heavens! It's fantastic," Lacy exclaimed.

"Oh no. No. Only clever. But very clever. There is a fine brain against us. It has smashed the case. There's no way to get round Noke's evidence the relics were faked. I couldn't swear they weren't. A bit of grey flannel—the right stuff's easy to get, and Davis's clothes were torn to ribbons. The skin—it might be Davis's—but any man can

scorch a bit of skin with short hairs. Brilliant bit of work. The best in my time. And successful. Mr. Carter is safe from us. But he killed Davis in his precious factory."

"You still believe that?" Lacy frowned.

"My dear major! Not a doubt."

"I quite agree," said Ive placidly. "It's a certainty but incapable of proof. One has these cases, major."

Lacy put his hand to his head. "That's dreadful," he muttered, "a terrible thought."

"Not nice, no," Reggie answered. "Same like we began. Mrs. Carson was a certainty-unproved."

"Good God, man," Lacy exclaimed, "you would have it her affair was an accident. Are you going back on yourself now?"

"Oh no. It was an accident. Point of interest, she said it wasn't. And she first drew our attention to Hurst. She was the beginning—for us. Strange but true—and quite bafflin'. However. We are not at the end."

"What on earth do you mean? You said we could do nothing more."

"That is so. But not wholly fully futile, our inquest work. There will be reactions on the man Carter. Good-bye." He went out whistling softly:

"Malbrouck s'en va t'en guerre."

CHAPTER XIII

SATURDAY TO MONDAY

REGGIE DROVE BACK to the Knob Inn and asked for an early dinner. "Simple and quick. Cold salmon and a cutlet or so. And could there be strawberries? Time I was no longer here."

"I understand, sir," Bunyard nodded.

"Smart fellow," said Reggie.

He was alone in the dining-room, he was treating his strawberries and cream with curaçoa, when Cloudesley came behind him. "I'm sorry you're going away, Mr. Fortune."

"Well, well," Reggie contemplated him dreamily. "Don't flatter me."

"I hope you've been comfortable."

"Oh yes. Yes. Good place, your place. And full of interest."

"Perhaps you'll come again some day."

"I wonder," Reggie consumed strawberries. "Life is real, life is earnest. By the way, heard about the inquest?"

"I was there," said Cloudesley.

"Is that so? Not conspicuously."

Cloudesley grinned. "Just one sardine in the tin."

"Too modest," Reggie sighed. "Well. How are the other sardines feeling about it?"

"As you ask me, they go with the jury. Bill Noke settled that."

"You think so? Meanin' there was dirty work?"

Cloudesley put on again his habitual baffling solemnity.

"There's no knowing what way, as the jury said."

"Oh yes. Yes. There is. Quite a bit of knowing about." Reggie drank up his claret. "You haven't told all you know, have you, Cloudesley?"

"I know nothing about his death, sir," said Cloudesley sharply.

"Good-bye," said Reggie.

He told his chauffeur to stop at Noke's garage and fill up. While the pump was working he got out, he went to the house, he asked for Noke, who was visible within at a high tea. "'Evening, sir," Noke wiped a large mouth. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm goin'. You're not. Just wanted to say, look after Miss Carter."

Noke's mouth came open. Then he said thickly, "Eh, that's a way o' talking!"

"Yes. For you." Reggie went back to his car and Noke stood watching till he had driven out of sight. . . .

On Sunday morning the church of Hurst had more people in it than the oldest inhabitant had ever seen there. Noke, coatless and collarless, sat down on his doorstep with a pipe and the Sunday paper as the bells began to ring and watched the churchyard gate.

A woman approached it at a slow and stately pace. "Eh, you're out again, are ye?" Noke said to himself, for she was Mrs. Carson. The rector came hurrying behind her, and she turned, smiling, and they talked for a minute or two, before he led her in. Straggling files marched up, natives of the soil, new settlers, factory workers, loitered, gathered into little parties and chattered and stared to see who was coming next.

But neither Carter nor Fay Carter came. The chimes died away and the treble bell went on ringing. A car drove up, Ludlow helped his wife out and the chatterers made respectful way for them and closed up behind. Some time after the bell stopped, the red car of Christabel Biggs shot down the lane. She brought it swirling

round, she crammed on her hat and scurried into the church.

"You!" said Noke. He spat, he began to read his paper.

It interested him so much that he was still reading hard an hour later and was startled by a voice which said, "Bad man. You need churching, Noke."

Noke looked up. "After you, Mr. Cloudesley," he grinned.

Cloudesley opened the garden gate. "Thanks. I haven't seen a paper." He took it out of Noke's hands. "What do you look like in print?"

"They done me proper," said Noke. He pointed a broad finger at headlines. "'What the Garage Knew—Motor Expert versus Police'."

"You old sinner! What the garage don't know would be news in hell."

"Seems like you're jealous, Mr. Cloudesley," Noke chuckled, but his shrewd eyes were not merry.

"Yes. I always wanted to knock out a policeman. But nobody ever taught me the trick." Cloudesley turned the paper. "Lord alive! They have trained the searchlights on you." The front page displayed a list: 'Characters of the Play—Harold Davis—junior partner in Jove Radio. J. Scott Carter—senior partner in Jove Radio. Fay Carter—his daughter, fiancée of Davis. Hugh Gower—the volunteer witness. Inspector Lucas—of the Mershire Police. William Noke—garage owner.' The inquest was reported as a drama, with Noke the god from the machine who put everybody right. But an epilogue had been added with headlines: "How was Davis Killed? An Unsolved Mystery."

"That's where you flop, Noke," said Cloudesley. "What the garage didn't tell. How?"

"Ah. I don't tell what I don't know. Who might you be thinking of?"

"It's not a race I'd bet on, my lad."

"They don't make much of Gower in the paper. You went down with Miss Milburn from the bonfire after Davis took Miss Carter off. I suppose you didn't see Gower about?"

"Not a hair of him." Cloudesley's eyes puckered. "Nothing doing that way—by me. You don't like comrade Gower?"

"I was just thinking what you might be thinking."

"That's dam' all," said Cloudesley.

"There's dirty doings, though." Noke's bushy brows came down. "What about Miss Carter, eh?"

"Poor baby. That's ruddy."

"I believe you."

People began to come out of the church, and Cloudesley urned and strode away. But he could not see Sally Milburn among them. His solemn face betrayed surprise in which there was no pleasure when he saw Mrs. Carson. She had Mrs. Ludlow's arm, she was gravely affectionate, and on the other side of Mrs. Ludlow's drooping silence, Christabel fussed. Ludlow followed some way behind, stopping for a word with anyone and everyone. But he was at the gate in time to persuade Mrs. Carson to get into their car and they drove off with her, and Christabel followed them.

Cloudesley looked after the two cars for a moment, his solemn visage wrinkled as if he were trying to see something far away and dubious. He lingered till the rector's departure from the church gave him evidence that no one was left inside, then marched back up the hill to the inn.

"So she ain't meeting you, mate," Noke said unheard. "And you ain't going after her. How much did you two see that there night?"

None of those in whom Noke had an interest came under his observation again that day, though he watched and prowled.

On Monday morning Mr. Fortune lay in his bath in London reading the papers. Having gone through them all, he leaned out, languidly benign, and took up again that noisiest national journal, *The Daily Life*.

In the biggest, blackest letters which it could carry *The Daily Life* printed across its most important page, one word: WHY?

Other papers splashed sensation about Man Electrocuted, Doctors Say, Police Evidence Turned Down by Jury, Violent Witness, Scenes in Court. But, for once in its rough story, *The Daily Life* was comparatively cold and calm. The others might scream their stunts. Its special commissioner, G. Howard Jones, lectured.

WHY? Why was Harold Davis killed? That question the amazing inquest at Hurst left unsolved. The police could not, or did not tell. Witnesses ran riot. The jury threw in their hand. They had evidence that he was electrocuted. They said there was no knowing how. Did they ask Why?

That was the question to which the public must demand an answer. Why? Why was Harold Davis, partner in the Jove Radio Works, killed on Midsummer Eve?

There followed a biography of Davis, prize boy at school and university, appointed technical expert to Jove Radio in its beginnings, promoted to junior partner—an account of the growth of Jove Radio and its owner, J. Scott Carter—a collection of facts put with vigour, without a tinge of prejudice.

And so Howard Jones came to the inquest (report on pages 5 and 6). He was supercilious—clash of police with Mr. Carter and his lawyer, Mr. Joshua Clunk, conflict of evidence, wild burst of passion—he gave snapshot descriptions—full of drama—but what had become of the truth? The real problem of the mystery was not dealt with. Why was Davis killed? To that the public interest required an answer.

A brilliant inventor had been cut off when he was coming to the fullness of his powers. A death by strange and subtle means, left unexplained, threatened the safety of the public. Why was Harold Davis killed?

Reggie felt that he had enough. "'Ask me no more,'" he murmured and dropped *The Daily Life* and climbed out of the bath and went to breakfast. Stayed with grilled sole and strawberries, he rang up Ive.

"Fortune speaking. Is this you?"

"Ive here," his voice was acidulated. "What is it?"

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! 'Ask me no more'. Too many questions this morning. One for you though. Are you Rosa Dartle?"

"I don't know the lady!"

"See Charles Dickens, his works. Miss Dartle just wanted to know, you know. Same like *The Daily Life*. Seven million whys. Did your office pass the word?"

"We are not amused," said Ive.

"Oh, no. No. Leavin' no stone unturned, explorin' every avenue, treadin' on every toe. And how!"

"Have you no shame?"

"Yes. Blushin' all over. I couldn't answer. I don't know why. Tell me."

"I can tell you. *The Daily Life* has gone over the edge of libel."

"Fancy that! Gorgeous!"

"If Carter sues them, or Jove Radio, you may expect that your friend, Mr. G. Howard Jones, will bring you in. A pleasant situation, Fortune."

"My poor Ive! It won't happen. I know the man Jones, yes. He hasn't had a word from me which you didn't hear. I spoke to him twice. First time I said: 'Press? Oh, no, no.' Second time I said: 'Oh, no, no. Please. Why? Why?' You remember? The strong, silent man. Same like you."

"I do remember. And he wrote up the case on that 'Why?' of yours."

"It could be. Wonderful institution, the Press. So pressing. 'How different from us, Miss Beale and Miss Buss'. Won't get me for libel on that though."

"You're incorrigible," said Ive.

"Yes, incurably scientific. Always try everything. Play the trombone to the vegetables, like the late Darwin. Which official vegetables can't understand."

"I understand that you've made a noise to cover the collapse of the case."

"Said you couldn't understand."

"The article is certainly libellous."

"Greater the truth, greater the libel, what? But will Carter sue? Fun for all! Another little point. Lots of people will be asking why now. Asking what the Public Prosecutor knows about Jove Radio."

"I am much obliged to you," said Ive bitterly. "You have certainly done your best to make a scandal. We can take no further action, as you know very well."

"And so to bed. Yes. That was in my mind. Hence these tears. Sleep well. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV

MEN AND WOMEN

ON TUESDAY MORNING the chief constable received a letter which annoyed him. It was printed in capitals on cheap paper. It asked him "WOT ABOUT PARSONS WOMAN". It bore the postmark of Hurst.

Even the unsophisticated police of Mershire are familiar with such letters. The chief constable tore it up and was trying to think no more about it when Inspector Lucas brought him an exact copy of it.

He glared. "Damn it, man, I've had one myself." He lectured Lucas on the craze for anonymous slander and the filthiness thereof.

"Yes, sir. It is nasty," Lucas agreed. "But what struck me was how funny it is——"

"Funny?" the chief constable choked and scolded.

"Beg pardon, sir, I didn't mean laughable—queer, strange, I should say, very strange, having scandal about the rector dug up and shoved on us now, just after the Davis inquest. It don't seem to have any bearing on that, only a throw back to Mrs. Carson's affair, where we had it first, bringing in Mrs. Ludlow——"

"Nonsense," the chief constable exclaimed, "Don't be a fool. Mrs. Ludlow wasn't brought in. You know very well she's above any suspicion. These letters are mere muck-raking. There's nothing strange about them. We often have such filthy stuff coming in after a crime."

"Yes, sir, but not about another case," said Lucas stubbornly. "That's what makes me think. Of course I'm not suspecting Mrs. Ludlow at all. It's the angle on

the rector and the Mrs. Carson business. If you remember, Mr. Fortune, the last thing he said, was kind of connecting Mrs. Carson's accident with Davis's murder."

"I dare say Mr. Fortune wrote the letters!" said the chief constable with ferocious sarcasm, and was pleased with himself.

Lucas laughed like a good subordinate. "Mr. Fortune is beyond me, sir. But nasty anonymous letters have made a lot of trouble before now. I would like to check up on these a bit, if you don't mind. The one thing we have certain is some wicked games are going on in Hurst. We did ought to watch out."

With some more difficulty, sworn to the most cautious discretion, Lucas got leave to see what he could do.

Having pieced together the letter which the chief constable's righteous wrath had torn and compared it with the other, he decided that they were both written by the same hand and the same pen, and the writer as unskilled as the bad spelling suggested. Both letters had been posted some time before six on Monday at some box in the many miles of Hurst parish. Only the envelopes showed any finger-prints and those were large and different, probably from postmen or sorters.

Beyond that Lucas's methods did not take him. He went over to Hurst and conferred with the sergeant and the constable who had charge of the busy settlement on the flats and the leagues of waste. Neither of them liked the rector, neither of them had heard scandal of him with any woman. "He ain't rightly a man, Mr. Troove ain't," was the sergeant's judgment. Folks did laugh at the way Mrs. Ludlow was always fussing at the church, but kindly, poor lady, she was that religious. The sergeant himself thought she had a liking for Mr. Troove because nobody else could do with him, sort of pity. A sweet lady.

The less sentimental mind of Lucas was not satisfied. He walked up to the church, and in the character of a

stranger seeing the country chatted with children coming home from school to the cottages about it. He learnt only that nobody ever went to the church o' week days except parson and sexton, oh and Mrs. Ludlow doing the flowers, Wednesday and Saturday.

His own observation confirmed that nobody went on Tuesday afternoon. The next day he returned inconspicuously.

Prone in the heather above the church, he saw Mrs. Ludlow approach it on foot with a basket of flowers. Lucas, who was hot enough lying down, wondered at her energy. Even using footpaths, the church must be some two miles from her house. It was the sultriest hour of a blazing day. Why didn't the lady come by car? As frail as she was, too. Sort of determined, steady walking, rather fast for a lady like her. A funny thing. Well, you never knew with women. Might be a sort of duty with her to walk uncomfortable to church. Or what? Say she didn't want to have a chauffeur noticing when she got there, and how long she stayed or anything.

Lucas had no desire to believe that, but his mind would not dismiss it. He looked up the lane to the rectory. No sign of Mr. Troove coming down. No sign of anybody that way. The many windows of Mrs. Carson's villa flashed back the sunshine across road and hillside and not the shadow of a creature could be seen. Yes! There was glitter moving, a streak of red, a car. It vanished behind banks of pine, it appeared again, swung round by the church and stopped.

A black mop of hair, a lissom little shape in green sped from it and vanished into the church.

The Australian young lady from Whitfold, Lucas remarked to himself, Miss Biggs. Funny too. She was at the Davis inquest. Never thought much of that. They said she poked in everywhere. Reg'lar bright young thing. But helping Mrs. L. do the altar flowers! Not the stuff.

Christabel did something in the church for a while. Both she and Mrs. Ludlow were still inside when Lucas saw Troove in the rectory lane. He approached, sliding along with a short-stepped gait. As he went into the churchyard Mrs. Ludlow and Christabel came out of the porch. The three met and Christabel chattered. Troove was plainly embarrassed, and Mrs. Ludlow anxious to go away. She went. Troove slid on into his church. Christabel pattered after Mrs. Ludlow, seemed to press her to the car. But she turned and walked away.

For a moment Christabel stood looking at her bent back. "Snubbed you, miss, didn't she?" Lucas remarked to himself. His mind was divided between respect for Mrs. Ludlow, taking the real lady's right to put a pushful bit o' goods in her place, and wonder whether the parson often turned up when Mrs. Ludlow was there, which included surprise that the young thing wanted to butt in. All funny, again.

Christabel drove back up the hill. Lucas waited to see how long Troove would stay in the church after the ladies had gone. It was more than half an hour. As he glided towards the rectory lane another woman met him, a stately woman walking with a stick, Mrs. Carson. He stopped, he talked to her, they went on together towards the flash of her villa's many windows.

Lucas called it a day and drove back to Merchester in a state of gloomy satisfaction, certain of nothing but that the Chief was wrong, those dirty letters had a bearing. What it might be, he could see no way to find out.

Christabel, where the road crossed a dip in the hills, stopped her car and its engine and lit a cigarette and sat gazing at the dim blue distance. Her eyes came slowly back to the nearer scene, the woodland and green sward of Tillingmere Manor, the brown mass of the house. "Oh hell!" she whispered, flung the cigarette away and sprang

out of the car and turned her back on Tillingmere and walked up through the heather to a higher point.

There she sat, hands clasping her knees, looking down across the combes and their streams and dark pools to the eruption of building on the flats.

After a while she became aware that someone was talking behind her. She sprang up, crossed the ridge and heard the voice more clearly, a dreamy chant:

“ . . . as Night by Day,
Winter by Spring, or sorrow by swift Hope
Led into light, life, peace. An antelope,
In the suspended impulse of its lightness
Was less aethereally light——”

“Says you!” she cried.

Out of the heather rose the head of Hugh Gower to glare at her.

She sat down beside him. “How do you get like that?” she asked. “Sleeping in the sun? Who’s the suspended antelope? A little thing of your own?”

“I am not to educate you, Miss Biggs,” he made the name a sneer. “Go home and learn to read.”

“What you write? Help!”

Gower laughed. “You have the mind of a fly. And its ways. That was the *Epipsychidion*. By someone as far above me as I am above you—Shelley.”

““Hail to thee blithe spirit, bird thou never wert——”” She chirped the line at him. “The skylark man. Not so bad.”

Gower tossed back his wild hair and stared at her, looking very young in disconcerted contempt. “There is something you know? Then you’re without excuse.”

“Be your age. What do you do beside lying on your back in the sun spouting dream stuff?”

“I live, Miss Biggs.”

"Not much. You curse like a kid. Anything else?"

"I make people like you uncomfortable."

"Sure. And others. What do you know about that happy pair of sweethearts? The man's killed and the girl's crazy, and you throw a cursing stunt and lie down and croon. Good work!"

"Davis was murdered by your rotten society," Gower said fiercely.

"Is that so?" Her eyes flashed at him. "Let's have it out. What do you mean?"

"I mean the social order which sets up you and your friends."

"Come down! Who killed him?"

"Private profit," Gower told her.

"You're telling me. Who smashed that girl?"

"You and your class." Gower was furious. "You know it."

"Blather. Class be damned. There is no class. Only men and women. Who was the man?"

"You are accusing me?" Gower laughed. "You have the brains of a parrot." He sprang up and marched away.

But she pattered after him. "Gosh, you flatter yourself. Accuse you! You haven't the guts to do anything."

He turned on her with clenched fists.

"So what?" She stood against him, slight and about as tall as his shoulder. "What will you do?"

"Go to the devil," said Gower, and turned and made off.

The shadows were longer and darker, it was after six o'clock when Sally Milburn, labouring on a new seed bed, saw Cloudesley come into her garden with the dog Dingo.

She straightened her admirable back, she looked at them and they stood still looking at her, and Dingo wagged his tail in slow, apologetic motion.

"Good evening," said Sally. "What is it?" Dingo's tail moved yet more slowly.

"Same to you, lady," said Cloudesley. "There hasn't been a good evening for quite a while. You don't come walking our way."

"No," said Sally. "I haven't wanted to." Dingo's tail stopped and stood horizontal. He gave up looking at Sally, he turned to Cloudesley.

"My name's mud?" Cloudesley asked. "If you say so—still and all—up to you to say why."

"I feel like that," Sally told him.

"But no reason for the rash act?"

Her broad brow wrinkled. "It's not any use joking."

"I wasn't. I happen to care about what you think. Let's have it straight. Why do you think I'm dirt?"

"You're not fair." Her eyes darkened. "Everything's horrible. You know very well I don't want to see you. You were so hard and spiteful about Hugh Gower—and so strange. You tell me to be straight. You didn't say anything straight. You just backed up Miss Biggs when she tried to make out it was him. I never thought you were like that."

"Thanks. You were right the first time, Sally. I haven't tried to put it on Hugh Gower. I could have made things worse for him at the inquest. I've seen him about with Fay a lot. I didn't say so, because it wouldn't have been fair."

"You don't believe he did it?"

"I don't believe anything. I don't know who did it," his solemnity relaxed into a grim smile. "I didn't, Sally. I was not on in that show. I went straight home from your blessed door—though you turned me down. I wasn't feeling murderous. Strange to say. Does that go?"

Sally blushed. Tears came into her eyes. "Of course, I didn't think you—you——" her voice failed.

"No?" Cloudesley came up to her. "You were afraid I did."

"Well——" Her dim eyes looked into his. "I thought

you knew something and you wouldn't say, and you were cruel about Gower. It was so strange."

"I don't know a dam' thing to swear against anybody, Sally. I haven't a doubt fat man Fortune's right. Davis was killed in the factory. But who and why—that has me beat. Believe me?"

"Yes," said Sally faintly, and then with more heart in it, "Yes, I do. I do."

"Praise God!" said Cloudesley and kissed her.

"Oh, no!" She started away. "It's all so dreadful." She ran to her bungalow, but the dog Dingo ran with her and, after a moment, Cloudesley followed, a smile of triumph on his solemn face which was ironed out before he went in.

CHAPTER XV

DINNER FOR THREE

REGGIE WAS BUSY that week with experiments for a hopeful theory about whooping cough. But on Thursday morning he conferred with Elise, his cook, on a dinner for three.

“‘Such gluttons men are’,” Mrs. Fortune quoted at him. She was dining out.

“My dear girl!” he was injured. “This is self-sacrifice. Duty before delicacy. Business dinner.”

It was French ham, clear turtle, red mullet, a richness of sweetbreads, duck and a cheese soufflé.

“For men of action, Joan,” Reggie explained.

“Of no morals,” said she and ruffled his hair.

The first guest to arrive was Tommy Owen, a sprightly youth of fifty or so, the youngest partner in an historic firm of stock-brokers. He had drunk two glasses of Reggie’s driest sherry before Ive came. They did not know one another, but that was no impediment to the flow of Tommy Owen’s babble about nothing, though Ive was drier than the sherry.

By the time they reached the fish, Ive, with the help of Montrachet, condescended to put some sardonic comments into the talk with Reggie and his stock-broker kept to general frivolity. When they were drinking Clos de Vougeot with the duck, Tommy Owen indulged more freely in his foible of knowing nothing about anything and Ive played up to him, as the sharp opposite number of a silly fool comedian. Reggie lapsed out of the conversation to become a benign audience.

With the soufflé came a bottle of Richebourg. Tommy Owen held his glass to the light, smelt it, winked at Reggie, sipped it and put on a look of devout reverence. "I say, I say! My dear old bean! How come?"

"Had it a long while. It's '98. Thought it might finish a burgundy dinner. Do you like it?"

"Modest little fellow, ain't he?" Tommy Owen turned to Ive. "Do we like it, brother? We're going up to heaven. They couldn't keep us out."

"But Fortune's cellar won't be there," said Ive.

"Bless you, he'll wangle that."

There followed strawberries. Ive refused them, and Owen, but Reggie filled his plate and poured cream and sugar largely. "Look at him," Owen cried. "With this wine. It's a sin."

"Oh no. No. You fellows are Puritans," Reggie smiled. "Afraid of the best."

Ive ate a devilled almond. "Fortune wants more than there is," said he. "The eternal child."

"The boy that wouldn't grow up." Owen went on with the theme while Reggie passed the bottle and filled his own glass again. Then they talked wine.

He took them into his library and gave them Marc with their coffee. "Not bad after burgundy, what?" He lit his cigar and blew smoke rings. "Oh, Tommy—before I forget. Ever heard of Jove Radio?"

Tommy Owen's cheerful countenance gave a vacant grin. "Not in my line, old dear. I have no use for wireless. My little world's noisy enough without."

"I meant in the City," Reggie murmured.

Owen shook his head. "It's not up my street. I wouldn't know. What's biting you? Some bloke wants you to do a flutter? Had a share pusher around? Grow up, boy."

"Don't you read the papers? Fellow done in the other day, partner in Jove Radio—factory down in Mershire."

Owen's mouth came open. He put a finger to his head. "Hold it! Splashed inquest on the bloke? *Daily Life* screeching why, why? Yes, there was a buzz about that. Wait. I don't know, you know. I never heard of Jove Radio. But some fellows were saying the concern was just coming out as a company—one of the promoting groups looking at it—might be Brust and Brust—then not so good. This why, why about the partner's death has put the kybosh on it now. Not a chance—if there ever was. I shouldn't know. We don't touch this stuff. Sorry to be no use, old bean. There it is."

"I see, yes," Reggie murmured, and Tommy Owen slid off easily into nonsense at large.

He was the first to go. When Reggie came back from showing him out Ive stood grim before the hearth. "That was adroitly managed, Fortune," said he.

"Tommy's way. He's always like that," Reggie smiled.

"No doubt. But you'd heard it before. You brought me to hear it."

"Nasty mind. I asked Tommy Owen to find out. I didn't know what he'd found till he told us. Now we know, Ive. Jove Radio was going to be turned into a company. There was a hitch. I should say poor Davis wouldn't stand for the tale they were going to tell in the prospectus. So Fay Carter was put on to capture him. Still he wouldn't stand for it. So he was murdered and his papers were destroyed. Murder very well done. And covered. It beat us at the inquest. But the ingenious murderer forgot our enterprisin' Press. He won't be selling Jove Radio to the public after all. And then?"

"You have a plausible explanation of the murder," said Ive tasting his words. "It is without any legal evidence. There is nothing we can act on."

"Oh no. No. Isn't that jolly? However. Given the murderer a nasty knock. Wasn't thinkin' of us, myself. Wonderin' what the next move would be."

"I find no reason to expect anything further which could be a matter for us," I've moved to the door.

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "Very comfortin'. My dear chap, must you go?" I've went.

CHAPTER XVI

FLAME IN THE NIGHT

ON FRIDAY EVENING Cloudesley was walking with Sally on the hills when a large car came up from the London side and stopped at the Knob Inn. But Sally did not see it. He had her arm in his and his pressed against her side.

Cloudesley never failed to see anything in sight, whatever his preoccupations. He turned her away from the inn and began to talk, but not to tell her that the car was Mr. Fortune's. His conversation was all about her, when she first met him, what she looked like, why she was the only girl in the world. She made faint fun of him, but she let him go on, she leaned against his arm. The evening was warmly fragrant with the scent of heather and languorous. He hadn't finished when he brought her to her door.

"May I come in, lady?"

She freed herself. "There's only bread and cheese, Tommy."

"Bread and cheese and kisses," said he and swung her in.

It was nearly midnight when he climbed the hill again. In the hall of the inn Bunyard met him with a husky whisper. "Sir, that Mr. Fortune's back. I thought right to let him have a room."

"Right. Same room?"

"Yes, sir. Staying the week-end or more, he said to tell you."

"God bless him. Let 'em all come," Cloudesley answered and went to bed.

But when Reggie finished his breakfast and lit his pipe and asked if Mr. Cloudesley was about, Bunyard exhibited humorous surprise.

"Well, no, sir. Mr. Cloudesley's gone to the show—the West Mershire agricultural, over at Filton, it's our big do round here." He pointed to a long bill of the glories thereof.

"What fun!" said Reggie, and wandered out.

He drove his car down to Noke's garage and found Noke making up the wages of his men. "Morning, Mr. Noke."

"Eh?" Noke drew a hand across his shining nose. "Good morning, sir. I didn't know you was here."

"How's it go?" Reggie smiled. "Been looking after Miss Carter?"

"I don't rightly understand what you meant by that. Miss Carter, she's not about much. She's carrying on, they say. But I never see her out up along here."

"Watch it," said Reggie, and wandered out.

He saw no one in Sally Milburn's garden. To his ring at the bungalow there was no answer.

He drove on into Merchester. The chief constable had gone away for a week-end at the sea. Inspector Lucas was out. Might be at the show at Filton.

Reggie drove over to the alluring Filton. In the tented field and the crowds of men and beasts there he could find neither Lucas nor Cloudesley nor even Sally Milburn. He came back to the inn and it was busy with Saturday holiday-makers. He fled on foot to seek solitude.

From the shade of the woods he saw a woman with a basket trudge stooping to the church. "Oh. The piety of Mrs. Ludlow?" he asked himself. When she came out again a gaunt cleric followed her. "With parson," his round face was like a child's who has found something unpleasant. "I wonder," he mumbled and looked round at Mrs. Carson's glassy villa with a frown. "Not nice, no," he sighed and lay back and gazed up through the dark of the trees . . .

It was some time after dinner. Quiet and dark had fallen upon the inn. He rose from a long chair in the garden and walked to the road. A dog sniffed his legs. "Mr. Cloudesley, I presume?" he asked.

"I'm with you, sir." A cigarette lighter flamed and showed their two faces. "I hope they've looked after you, Mr. Fortune?"

"Done me very well. You always did."

"Thank you. We want people to come back."

"Busy days with you?"

"Bearing up. Sorry I've been out all day. Dog judging at Filton. I say"—Dingo was pleased with Reggie's legs—"does that hound bother you?"

"Oh no. Soothin'. I like dogs. They like me. Though I honour cats."

"He's fallen for you," said Cloudesley. "And he's particular. A cat man isn't often a dog man either."

"No rules, are there?"

"You're above 'em, Mr. Fortune."

"Oh no. No. The natural man." Reggie threw away his cigar and gazed through the night. Cloud banks moved low across the sky. The hills were lost, the woodland black gloom. "Well. How are things?"

"You mean the inquest row? I should say Hurst backs the jury. We have all sorts here, nobody loves the police."

"Backin' anybody else?" Reggie drawled.

"I said we had all sorts. Gower don't go good with most. But he has a bunch of the young factory hands for him."

"Very neat," Reggie murmured. "Meanin' Gower is real, ripe red. Down with the wicked owner, partner or what not."

"If you ask me, he's not anything real," said Cloudesley sharply.

"Yes, I was askin' you. Who's backin' the owner?"

Cloudesley lit another cigarette. "Carter?" he asked.

"Carter's well liked. I told you, the big vote is for him, he's all right."

"Are you votin'?"

"With the jury."

"Not knowin' how? Havin' thought of all you know?"

Cloudesley swung round and faced him. "If I knew anything to fix Davis's death on anyone I'd have passed it up."

"Well, well. How's Miss Carter?"

"Poor kid. I—— What's the matter?"

Reggie had gripped his arm and swung him round. Out of the dark of the woodland, a tongue of flame shot up showing the ridge of the hills as it soared high above, like a flaring cloud. The sound of an explosion followed the light. Deep in the dark fire blazed.

"Lord alive!" Cloudesley exclaimed. "That's like an incendiary bomb."

Reggie ran to the garage and backed his car out. "Come on," he called. "Which way?"

"Downhill. First left." Cloudesley jumped in beside him. "It's somewhere near the Filton road."

"Oh. See anybody at Filton?"

"Mobs of dog growers. Nobody else. What do you think this is, sir?"

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Did you see a flash in the dark on the night Davis died?"

"No," said Cloudesley. "Slow, sir. Sharp left here."

Reggie swung the car into a lane which it filled, and chased his headlights through the wriggling curves in steady, ruthless speed.

CHAPTER XVII

SALVAGE

THEY WERE IN woodland. The headlights showed a switchback with a hairpin bend at the bottom. "Filton road just beyond, sir," said Cloudesley. "T crossing."

They surged over the switchback to check and stop with the headlights glaring over a tarred road at a bank of sandstone. On either side murmuring trees closed black above them. Reggie switched off the headlights and looked each way of the road. Not a gleam showed through the darkness.

"That way goes down to all the new part of Hurst," Cloudesley pointed right. "The other way up over the hill to Filton."

"Which way do we go to the fire?"

"I should say, a toss up. It came out of wood, but there's a mile or more of wood both ways. We can't be certain it was on the road, Mr. Fortune."

"No knowing, what?" Reggie drawled.

"I'll swear it was hereabouts," Cloudesley snapped.

"Yes, I think so," Reggie turned to the south-west wind which blew across and up the road and smelt it, smelt nothing but the odour of pines. He scrambled up the sandstone bank and peered through the woods and could see nothing either way. He looked along the gradient of the road and found that it flattened out below and the bank dwindled. A crackling, hissing sound came to him faintly through the rustle of the branches.

He dropped down to the car. "Not quite fifty-fifty," he murmured, switched on the headlights again and turned

up the hill. But he drove with something like caution. The road climbed steeply, out of the bushes on both sides sheer rocky banks rose higher, till they could see nothing above, they were in a tunnel of their own light.

"Get that?" Reggie asked.

"You mean the smell?" Cloudesley answered. "It's a car exhaust, car ahead of us running hot. This is a deuce of a hill for an old engine."

"Oh yes," Reggie murmured, and drove faster. The headlights discovered a thin drift of vapour, and as the road curved their beams pierced into smoke which filled it from bank to bank and hung heavy over the undergrowth. Therein the white light showed opaque grey jets in spouting movement, made pallid the glow beneath which spread a shapeless mass.

Reggie slowed and brought his headlights full upon that before he stopped. In the reek of the smoke, smells of petrol and burning wood and grass were mixed with a sickly stench. He jumped out and ran past the dying fire and scraps of metal twanged under his feet and caught at them before he came to the mass at the left of the road.

A dense, oily pall hung over the heat which was still dull red in it. It was a car which lay on its off side, the bonnet crushed into the rocks of the bank, the back broken off, the floor destroyed, the roof crumpled and torn. But inside the body of a man hung tangled across the levers and steering column.

Grasping at him from the back in the fetor of burnt leather and flesh, Reggie dragged him away from the scorching metal, while Cloudesley leaned through a broken window and eased body and limbs along, the charred clothes breaking to a dust of tinder under their hands.

They carried him away beyond the smouldering bushes, beyond the smoke, and laid him down by the roadside in clean air.

Reggie jumped into his car and backed it till its lights fell upon the body. The head was bald, head and face black. Cloudesley gasped an oath. "As you say. Not nice," Reggie murmured. "Recognize him?"

"Good God, no. Do you?"

"Oh yes. Mr. Scott Carter," said Reggie, and as he knelt by the body Cloudesley swore again.

A large man loomed through the smoke and shouted truculently: "Here, what's all this?"

"Same to you," said Cloudesley. "And who are you?"

"I'm gamekeeper to Whitfold. What might——"

"Come on, George," Cloudesley interrupted. "Give a hand."

"What for?" The man approached. "Mr. Cloudesley! Beg pardon, sir. I——" He saw the body and choked.

Reggie stood up. "Yes. Know anything about it?"

"Gawd, not me! Here, look, I was up along the hill going round my coverts 'cos I've had blackguards after young birds. I just saw a fire over this side and came down to find out what was up."

"Very proper. Met anybody?"

"I have not." The keeper looked sidelong at the dead body. "How ever did he get like that there?"

"Car smash," said Cloudesley. "Burnt in the car. We pulled him out. You saw the car, didn't you?"

"That's right. Burnt to death, eh, poor bloke! That's cruel. I say——"

"Where's the nearest telephone?" Reggie asked.

"They got one at Whitfold Hill Farm, matter of a mile."

"Cloudesley, can you drive my car?"

"If you like," Cloudesley was surprised.

"Take our friend to show you the way. Ring up the Merchester police. I want Inspector Lucas to come out with an ambulance. And some men. Step on it."

"Very good. Tell him Carter's dead?"

"Oh yes. Yes. Quite dead. Tell him everything. Then come back."

"What's that?" the keeper exclaimed. "Mr. Carter is it, the Hurst wireless works? Lor' lumme!"

"Get on, George," Cloudesley hustled him along and the big car slid away with them through the thinning smoke.

Reggie looked at his watch. The time was a little short of midnight. He lit a pipe and walked back to the skeleton of Carter's car and after considering it for a while went on. The top of the hill was only a few yards beyond. There he stopped.

On the farther side the road was still between high banks for some way, but it went down by a sharper gradient, a low gear climb for any car but the best. The scarp of the ridge fell steep to dim levels in which far away a few lights still glimmered through the velvet dark.

"That will be Filton," Reggie said to himself. "Four miles, five? And some hill. Filton. Where Cloudesley was. Where everybody was. Cloudesley was back at the inn by ten or so. Carter crashed round about eleven. I wonder." He sat down on a stone and meditated till lights rushed up the hill towards him. Then he walked out into their beams calling: "Cloudesley?"

"Sir!" Cloudesley stopped the car. "I've turned out the police. I had to pull old man Lucas out of bed, and it took some time to get things into his fat head. Then he went right up in the air. I gather he hadn't heard you'd come again, Mr. Fortune."

"No. Wasn't expected, was I?" Reggie murmured. "However. Not without use." He stepped on to the running board. "Let her run down to it." The smoke had become no more than a mist of stench, the lights came close to the smashed car. "That'll do." Reggie dropped off. "What do you say, Cloudesley? Why did he crash on the bank there? How did he crash?"

"It beats me," said Cloudesley. "He wouldn't have

much speed, whichever way he was coming, right at the top of the hill."

"No knowing how?" Reggie drawled. "Same like the jury said. For Davis. Same like you said. My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Think again."

He stooped in the light to look close at the gaping rear of the ruined car, to peer underneath into the remnants of the petrol tank.

Cloudesley came to his side. "Well, well," he turned. "Any ideas?"

"Somehow the car crashed into the bank and the petrol lit up," said Cloudesley.

"You think so? Which way was he going?"

"How can you tell? The car's half turned."

"Did you see him at Filton show?"

"I did not. I shouldn't have thought he'd be there. Carter wasn't that sort."

"And yet he did crash on the Filton road. Curious and interestin'."

Reggie wandered away in the spreading light, bent over the road, moved to and fro like a questing dog. . . . More than once he picked up a piece of metal and put it down again, and still he searched till at last he found a fragment which interested him. He kicked a stone from the roadside to the place where he had found it. He returned and held it close against the headlights. . . .

A small, benign smile came on his wistful face. As Cloudesley looked over his shoulder, "Here you are," he said, and put the fragment into Cloudesley's hands. It was a piece of thin plate, slightly curved, with torn edges. "Well?"

"Looks like a bit of the petrol tank," Cloudesley answered.

"Yes, I think so," Reggie purred. "Still hot, and you saw me pick it up, what? You'd swear to that?"

"I would, sir."

"All right. Scratch a private mark of yours on it so you'll know it again."

Cloudesley took out a penknife and obeyed. "Here you are. May I ask why?"

"My dear chap! So nobody can say this was faked by the police. Same like the bits of Davis produced from Carter's car." He took the fragment, held it to the headlight again and pointed to a tiny spot where the light filtered through. "You see that? In the plate when found."

"I'll swear it was," Cloudesley agreed. "And that means a flaw in his tank."

"As you say," Reggie murmured. "Come on." They got into his car again and manœuvring to avoid the stone in the road he drove slowly on, out of the smell to the clean air beyond Carter's body. There he stopped and lit another pipe and lay back and closed his eyes. . . .

A horn sounded from down the hill, headlights met his, cars came up and stopped.

"Inspector Lucas?" Reggie called. "Fortune here."

The bulky shape of Lucas marched up to him. "I say, Mr. Fortune, this is a do! Is it right what Mr. Cloudesley told me?"

"Oh yes. Yes. Cloudesley's seen all I saw." Reggie came wearily down to the road. "Here you are. Here's the corpse."

"My God!" Lucas gulped. "That's ghastly. Did he—did he——"

"Suffer? Yes, I think so. But not long. However. Tell you more to-morrow. Send him to the mortuary. Come on, there's his car. Parts still red hot when found at eleven fifteen. Corpse contorted in driving seat. No trace of other occupant. If I were you—I should photograph the whole set out by flashlight and daylight. Get that stone in the road clear. When the photos are done, when the light's good, collect every last bit of stuff around. Have your best motor engineer out to the car before you move it

into Merchester. Tell him this bit of stuff was found where the stone is." He gave Lucas the fragment wrapped in a cloth. "I'd like to see him when I've done the body. That's all now. Except Carter's daughter. Do you know where she is?"

"She's at home, sir. We rang up from Merchester. She said her father had been out in his car all day, she didn't know where."

"And you told her?"

"We told her there was a report he'd had an accident. Nothing more. We'll have to let her know now."

"Yes. God help her. Gentle as you can. And watch her. Well. To-morrow's another day. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN AND THE CAR

IT WAS A little before noon on the next morning when Reggie, paler than his wont but bright of eye, left his rearrangement of Carter's body and sought the remains of Carter's car.

They had been brought to a workshop of the one garage in Merchester capable of anything. Its second in command, Joe Gorton, a hard-faced young man of Birmingham accent and training, was busy with them and sour to Reggie: "I heard you'd be round telling me how to do my job, Mr. Fortune."

"Oh no. Nothing like that. Up to you, the car. I asked Lucas to get the best man, and passed my bit of stuff on for your opinion. They gave it you?"

"Ay. You might have left it for me to find. I wouldn't have missed it."

"Of course you wouldn't. If it had been there. The point was—we had tricks played over Carter's car in the Davis murder. Couldn't afford any meddling with the evidence this time. I had a witness mark that bit of plate when and as found, and took it away in case anything should happen to it in the night."

"I get you." Gorton gave him a shrewd look. "I was wondering how the scratches came on it. You're right, somebody might easily have mucked it up and that would have been a pity."

"You think so? Well. Matter for you. I've done the body. I'm feelin' like lunch."

"My Lord! You have a stomach. I heard he was a foul mess."

"Not nice, no. However. Got results. You've not done the car? Hear yours later."

"I'll be through in an hour or two," said the cautious Gorton.

Fortified with the beef and beer of which Mershire is proud, Reggie came dreamily into the presence of the chief constable.

"Here we are again, major," he sighed and dropped into a chair.

"Yes," Lacy glowered at him, "I can't say I'm glad to see you."

"People often aren't," Reggie complained. "But you're not surprised?"

"I remember what you said when you went away after the inquest—we were not at the end—there would be reactions on Carter."

"My dear major! Thanks very much. I did tell you so, yes. But I am not proud. Yet."

"Did you expect this?"

"No, not this in particular. No definite expectation."

"What made you come down again on your own account?"

"Oh, major! Duty. I hadn't finished. I couldn't finish. I have to. Somehow."

Lacy gave him a queer stare of distrust and alarm. "You came down just before Carter's death."

"Not quite. Thirty odd hours before. Not to kill him. And I didn't."

Lacy put his hand to his mouth. "I'm not suggesting such a thing," he said thickly.

"No? Kind of you. However. I hadn't seen him since the inquest till I saw him dead and burnt in his car last night. My alibi is perfect."

"Don't be facetious," Lacy cried.

Inspector Lucas came into the room and looked with

apprehension in his tired eyes from Lacy's horrified wrath to Reggie's calm.

"My Lucas!" Reggie turned to him. "A bad night. Anything new in the day?"

"Not by me, sir. Not to help. What are you giving us?"

"All clear, my part. Cause of death, shock from severe burns. Wound in back of skull made by splinter of metal also conduced to shock. Which means that the man was in his car when the petrol tank blew up, broke his head and covered him with flaming petrol. He died quick. Previous to death, he'd taken a lot of whisky. Enough to make an ordinary man muzzy. Not much food with it. I doubt if he was drunk, but he might be unfit to drive."

"Well then," Lucas exclaimed in a gush of relief, "very well, that is to say, it's a case of accidental death, the result of driving under the influence of drink."

"On the medical evidence, yes," Reggie dragged out the words. "It could be. Satisfied, major?"

"Certainly. You give us a complete explanation."

"Oh. I didn't say that. More evidence required. For instance—Lucas—was Carter a drinker?"

"Like other people, sir. He did use whisky."

"It's not strange that he should be drinking too much after all the worry over Davis's death," said Lacy.

"No. Quite natural. Might even be expected. I agree. Point of importance. Second point: where did he drink last night, so that he drove muzzy to the top of Filton hill at eleven o'clock? Where was he comin' from, where was he goin' to?"

"That's easy, Mr. Fortune," said Lucas. "He was coming from Filton show. I saw him there myself. He'd be going home."

"Well, well. So he was at the show. Yet Cloudesley said he wasn't the sort to go to your rural shows. Curious."

"I don't know why Mr. Cloudesley should say that."

Mr. Carter wasn't interested in farming or sport, but I've seen him often enough at the big do's where he'd meet people. And Filton gets 'em."

"Statement of Cloudesley not reliable? Still more curious he made it. However. Pursuin' my second point. How long would it take Carter to get from the show to the top of the hill? Quarter of an hour? So he didn't leave Filton till ten forty-five or so. Rather late to stay at an agricultural show, what?"

"You can't say that, sir. Lots of men hang about in the town for a bit of dinner or supper or a drink or two."

"Oh yes. He did hang about. He did drink. Who drank with him? We want to know that."

"I haven't——" Lucas began and was interrupted by the arrival of Joe Gorton.

"Good afternoon, Major Lacy. I came round to block out the facts for you, because you ought to have 'em at once." He rattled on, strident and incisive. "First, Carter's car swerved into the bank head on, coming from the Filton side. Her steering gear was O.K. She was in second, going at a low speed, about fifteen an hour. The damage to the bumper and bonnet would have been much more serious if she'd been doing more. Also, a car of her age and power couldn't have made a higher speed when she'd only just got over the hill. From a smash like that, major, damage to the petrol tank is impossible. I am satisfied the collision did not cause the explosion of the tank but vice versa. The tank blew up, and in the shock and the flames Carter turned the car into the bank and crashed her. The cause of the explosion was, the tank had been tampered with. Cast your eye over this bit of metal. It was found on the road by Mr. Fortune ten feet from the car, passed by him to Mr. Lucas and so to me, carefully wrapped up. I should say I'm glad Mr. Fortune made sure it came to my hands as found. It was blown out of the bottom of the tank on the near side, which means it was just over the exhaust.

Hold it up to the light and you'll see a small hole filmed over with sooty grease. That hole was not made by accident but with a sharp tool. It would make the petrol drip slowly on to the exhaust pipe. That car would run very hot climbing from Filton. So the petrol drip lit up and fired the tank and made the explosion. There have been plenty of cases of tanks exploding like that from a puncture over the exhaust. I've never had one before where I thought there was foul play. But here it's proved. This hole was made deliberately just at the place and in the circumstances to produce a fire which would destroy the car and the driver. It's darned clever, the way it was thought out, it was smart work, I'll tell the world! If that bit of tank had been lost or smashed or mucked up, I'd have had nothing I could swear to, I'd only have been telling you the whole affair was fishy, but you couldn't do anything about it. Now you've got it straight. Carter was murdered as sure as if he'd been shot, and a devilish way, too. I hope to God you get the brute that did it."

Lacy leaned his head on his hand. "It's a very technical argument, Gorton," he complained. "How can you be sure this—this puncture was not made by a flying stone, or bumping into a wall or fence?"

"I am sure. I know my job. It's a hole punched by a tool and it couldn't have been accidental. No getting round that, major, believe me. You'll have my full report to-night." Gorton bustled out.

"As I was sayin'," Reggie murmured, "the inquest on Davis would have reactions on Carter. Here you are,"

CHAPTER XIX

TOO MANY PEOPLE

"SO THAT IS what you meant!" the chief constable exclaimed. "You anticipated Carter's murder, you came down to find it, and you handed Gorton the evidence. What he says is what you've made him say."

"Oh no. No. Mustn't talk like that, major," Reggie reproached him. "Gorton wouldn't like it at all. Also it's not accurate. He couldn't say anything else. I have my uses. I did make sure of the evidence this time. But I have also limitations. Thought we'd have some more to do with Mr. Carter. Didn't anticipate his murder. If I had, I'd hand you a murderer or so. Sorry. Not yet."

"You're very subtle," said Lacy, "Very ingenious indeed. But your theories don't make sense. You were quite sure Carter murdered Davis——"

"Oh yes. Yes. He did."

"Now you are equally sure Carter has been murdered. The two theories are incompatible."

"My dear major! Oh, my dear major!" Reggie moaned. "Not theories. Facts. And quite consecutive. One leads on to the other."

"Preposterous!" Lacy exploded.

Lucas cleared his throat. "Beg pardon, sir, if I take Mr. Fortune's meaning, this second murder would be revenge for the first."

"Is that what you suggest, Fortune?" Lacy was contemptuous.

"One of the possibilities," Reggie murmured. "Friend of Davis, partisan of Davis, some fellow who thought

Carter was making a mess of Jove Radio. Yes. Rather attractive possibility that. Any evidence for it, Lucas?"

"Not to say evidence, but I have it there's been more than a spot of trouble at the radio works since Davis's death. He was well liked and Carter not, and beyond that there's talk Carter had some new deal up his sleeve which wouldn't do the men any good. The papers have put things in their heads, you know. All the 'why, why' stuff in the *Daily Life*—why was Davis done in?"

"Is that so? Well, well," Reggie drawled.

"And I suppose I needn't tell you that Hugh Gower has been on the job with the young hands talking wild about Carter. Well, there it is. Sort of labour trouble blowing up hot, and Gower behind it."

"Yes, quite good, Lucas. I should say the radio works are a factor in both murders."

"Industrial crimes!" said Lacy with disgust. "We've never had such a thing in the county."

"It's an age of progress, major. Industrial and financial forces goin' strong. However. About Gower, Lucas. Was he at Filton show?"

"I didn't see him. But what's that? I didn't see Mr. Cloudesley and he was there. They had a rare big crowd!"

"Convenient! And Gower would be with the proletariat, if anywhere. Not an engineering mind though, what? Neither for electricity nor a motor job."

"Not him, but he's in with young fellows who could do anything like that."

"Comrade Gower having put it into their heads," Reggie moved uncomfortably and his round face was drawn as if pain stabbed at him. "Might have been," he mumbled, "Might have worked out that way." He drew a long breath. "Confused, confusin' case. Well. Did you see anyone else from Hurst at Filton?"

"Of course I did. The show draws all sorts, from the gentry like Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow and Mrs. Carson down

to old Noke and anybody with half a dollar to spare. I saw Mr. Troove looking at the flowers and Miss Biggs from Whitfold talking to him, and that fine girl Miss Milburn. I could reel you off names by the yard if you like."

"I don't," Reggie sighed. "No. Too many people. Yet you didn't see Cloudesley."

"Not to see him myself. Come to that, I didn't see Ludlow nor Mrs. Carson. I only heard they were there."

"And you did see Carter—though Cloudesley didn't—where was our Carter when seen by you?"

"I saw him about four o'clock by the refreshment tent at the back of the five bob stand, that's the best one."

"Alone?"

"Well, I didn't notice anybody with him, but there were quite a few around, going to and from the bar."

"Last news of our Carter alive—at four p.m. he was lingerin' among the élite—without obvious companion—as havin' drunk or bein' about to drink. And at eleven or so he was dead, still solitary, with much drink inside. Not definite, Lucas."

"I know that, sir. It's not anything."

"Oh yes. Yes. Interestin' and suggestive but inadequate. We want some more. Why did our Carter go to the show?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Cloudesley took the trouble to say Carter wasn't the sort that goes. You don't agree. I don't always find Mr. Cloudesley convincin'. But I think he believed this. Why should he try to persuade me Carter wasn't likely to be there? If Carter did go, we were sure to find out. As we have. However. Check on it. Carter's servants must know whether it was out of his line to spend time on an agricultural show. Carter's daughter——" Reggie was silent for a moment. "Yes. The girl. How is she takin' it?"

"Awful," said Lucas. "She went down in a dead faint. When they brought her round she just cried and cried, hopeless. Can you wonder?"

"No, I don't," said Reggie. "Hopeless. Helpless. 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.'"

Lacy jerked back. "What, what? Out of *Hamlet*, isn't it? Why?"

"What Ophelia said," Reggie murmured, and Lacy struggled with inarticulate thought.

Lucas cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for Miss Carter myself," he announced. "It's very hard, first her young man and then her father. My opinion is, we won't get anything out of her. I don't believe she knows anything any use to us."

"We have to take it so, yes," Reggie agreed. "Fear is not evidence."

"Poor child!" Lacy found words again. "Fear—naturally she's afraid. Do you suggest she has some guilty knowledge, Fortune?"

"Guilty? Oh no, no. Caught in a storm she can't fight, she don't understand."

"That's your industrial crime theory!" Lacy exclaimed. "You mean she's the innocent victim of a criminal attack on the management of the radio works."

"Speakin' roughly, yes. But you speak very roughly. I should say, some game with Jove Radio is the dominant force in both murders. But there is more than that workin' to break up lives in Hurst. Personal passion, personal hate."

"And that brings in Gower again," said Lacy eagerly. "You think his Bolshevik mischief with the factory hands was mixed up with his—his desire for Miss Carter and his jealousy of Davis?"

"The point is well taken. One of the possibilities, yes. Attractive possibility. It would explain almost everything. Includin' our first little problem—what was Mrs. Carson up to in the church tower when the bat flew into her hair and she fell down. She might have gone there to eavesdrop

on Gower philanderin' with Miss Carter below. They were found just close to the church subsequent. But one little difficulty does remain. If Mrs. Carson was spying on Gower, if she wanted to be nasty, why didn't she say she'd seen him? It would have made her faked story that some fellow hit her much stronger. Yet she left him out." Reggie looked from Lacy to Lucas with round, plaintive eyes. "I don't understand," he said, and his voice rose high, like a troubled, resentful child's. But after a moment he went on in a silky murmur: "Till we know why Mrs. Carson went to church, we don't know where we are."

"I can't follow you," Lacy objected. "Your ingenious theory of Mrs. Carson's injury was not proved, it can't be proved. But even if it's true, if the woman was up in the tower for some scandalous purpose, she can have had nothing to do with Davis's death. She hadn't recovered, she was still laid up at the time. And as to Carter's death, surely it's incredible she used a tool on his petrol tank. That requires knowledge of cars and skill."

"Oh yes. Yes to everything. She didn't do the murders. No reason to believe she was concerned. I should say she wasn't. However. Concerned in something at that church. Not the great game. Not the game with Jove Radio. Not the financial, industrial side. Or only by the way. But the personal side, the passion and hate which have cut in—she might be there."

Lucas looked at Lacy. "If I may say so, sir, Mr. Fortune ought to be told about the anonymous letters." Lacy made a gesture of impatient disgust.

"Mr. Fortune ought," said Reggie sharply. "Well?"

"I'll show you, sir." Lucas went to get them.

"They are the common filth which is always being sent us," said Lacy. "Silly scandal about the rector and Mrs. Ludlow."

"Oh. New evidence of intrusion of personal factor. Passion and hate about other people."

"Evidence!" Lacy exclaimed. "It's nauseous folly. Mrs. Ludlow is a saint of a woman and Troove's an ascetic."

"As you told me before. Yet someone wants you to think otherwise. That is evidence, major. When did you get the letters?"

Lucas answered as he came back with them. "The Tuesday morning, the inquest being over on Saturday. Here you are, Mr. Fortune—no finger-prints, only men's on the envelopes."

"Well, well!" Reggie read the letters. "Illiterate, yet the writer knew enough to leave no prints for us. Yet they were written with a smooth running broad nib. Not the usual pen of the illiterate. Curious and interestin'. And the moment! Carter havin' got off at the inquest on Davis, the writer thought now's the day and now's the hour to turn the police on Mrs. Ludlow and Mr. Troove. Interestin' and curious."

"I don't see it," said Lacy angrily. "Of course the letters are disguised. Very likely they were written by a person of some education. Nearly everyone is educated nowadays. And as for the moment—a sensational case often brings us a crop of spiteful muck-raking."

"Yes. I have noticed it," Reggie murmured. "However. Very curious, the moment. Everybody knew Mrs. Ludlow was at the church and the parson not far off on the afternoon Mrs. Carson was damaged there. If anyone wanted to tell us Mrs. Ludlow and Troove were behavin' improper, why not hand it in at once? Why wait till after Davis was murdered, till after we'd grilled Carter and he'd got away with it?" He contemplated Lacy and Lucas with closing eyes. "Any ideas?"

"It's futile to expect a reason for anonymous filth," Lacy told him.

"I don't know what you have in mind, Mr. Fortune," said Lucas. "For myself, I can't make out any connection with this scandal and Davis's murder or Carter's, nor Mrs.

Carson's affair either. It's just silly to suggest Mrs. Ludlow or Mr. Troove could have anything to do with the murders. Even if they were carrying on together, which I find it hard to believe, neither of 'em would know how to set about the tricky way the murders were done. And the same with Mrs. Carson."

"As you say. Murders required engineering minds. Carter had one. He killed Davis, alone or with help. Fellow who killed Carter wasn't the rector or Mrs. Ludlow or Mrs. Carson. Those three come in on the personal side, the passion side. And somebody's mixed that up, good and well. Done anything about the letters?"

"I have, sir. I verified that the parson does meet Mrs. Ludlow when she goes to the church, week day afternoons." Lacy made an exclamation of disgust. "Well, I mean to say, there's the basis of these anonymous letters," Lucas protested. "It's a thing bound to be noticed, they meet regular. But then the afternoon I saw 'em, Miss Biggs, of Whitfold, went to the church the same time. It did seem to me they weren't too pleased to have her. I couldn't help thinking that young lady does butt in on all this business. I have it she went up to the Knob on the bonfire night when poor Davis and Miss Carter were dancing there. You may remember, she was at the inquest on him both days, every minute. That's a nice thing for a young lady. And then, she was over at the Filton show, going very strong."

"And our Miss Biggs runs a wicked car," Reggie murmured. "Well, well." He gazed at Lucas dreamily. "Too many people!" he complained.

"That's right, there are!" said Lucas. "It's enough to drive you mad, the way this thing's turned out. We had good hard evidence to hang Carter for Davis's murder, and then that all went over Noke swearing the things I found in Carter's car were put there to make a case."

"Yes. Very bitter," Reggie sympathised. "Somebody with a brain, somebody with a fine large nerve against us. Great game in the great style."

"It's no game to me, it's wicked," Lucas rebuked him. "You could say the things in the car were put there to hang Carter or to get him off by making fools of us, which is what happened. But now Carter himself is murdered and we can't get near who did it nor why—might be to damage the works—then it wasn't him murdered Davis—might just as well be that he was in that with someone else who had to shut his mouth—and it might be some private row, sex stuff, like you say, was mixed up with the works trouble—there are a lot of women about—but we can't fix anything on anybody."

"My dear chap!" Reggie purred. "Not yet, no. However. You're makin' the worst of it. Possibilities not obscure. Line of action obvious. Why did Carter go to Filton? Where did he park his car? What was he doing between four p.m., when you saw him alive, and eleven p.m., when I found him dead? Who met him? Who drank with him? Who said good-bye to him? When did the other Hurst people leave Filton? Which way did they go?"

"That's a job and a half," said Lucas.

"It is. Yes. Too many people," Reggie answered. He stood up slowly. He looked down at the gloom of Lacy and Lucas and his round face was bare of any expression, his eyes almost closed. "Though we have eliminated Carter," he drawled, "Quite a lot to do yet. I'm stayin'. I'll see it through—now." He left them.

"My God!" Lucas muttered. "He's hard. I never met a man made me feel queer like he does. Half turns me up. Not human, I mean."

"It's a pose, it's a pose," said the chief constable nervously reassuring himself. But he wrote to the Public Prosecutor about it.

CHAPTER XX

TWO AND TWO

THAT SUMMER MADE up for its lateness by weeks of sunshine from a calm sky. The hills of Hurst basked in a haze of heat as Cloudesley came down with the dog Dingo to Sally's bungalow. Dingo arrived first.

Though it was late afternoon she had not finished her hampers of lettuce for the next day's market. She bent in a shed cording the last but one. Dingo came from behind and stood up and licked her neck. She started, fumbled a knot and he dropped down and grinned and panted at her. "Sinful," said Sally. He wagged his rear.

Cloudesley came into the shed. "Woman! Don't flirt!" he took hold of her. "You're pleasing," he kissed her.

"Go away. I'm busy."

"Suffering saints! Why so late? I've been waiting on the hill for hours."

"Don't you ever do anything?" she bent to her hamper again.

"I should say so. I wait for you all day and all night. You know that, Sally."

She looked at him sideways. "What a life!"

"Your fault. But I don't tie granny knots. Here, give me," he took the cord out of her hands.

"I wasn't. It was your dog bothered me. You have no conscience between you."

"The dog tempted you, like a gentleman. And you did a granny. Are you virtuous? No." He tied up the hamper. "And that's the last. Praise God!"

"Now I have frames to water," said Sally, and swung away.

"Not!" He caught her. "Blow your greens."

"I must really. They're parched."

"All right. Ain't I meek? You wait. Where's the perishing what nots?" He helped her with tank and cans and not till the work was done, till they were going back to the bungalow, did he speak again. "Now, lady, what about it? Why was I cut out? Why so late to-day?"

"I'm sorry, Tommy," she pushed back her hair, her grey eyes met his frankly but with trouble in them. "Inspector Lucas has been here. He stayed an awful time."

"Blast his impudence," said Cloudesley. "What's he plagued you with?"

"All about the Filton show. Has he been at you too?"

"He has. Like a jolly old bluebottle. Buzz, buzz, buzz. Just wanting to know, you know, and God knows what. Lucas doesn't."

"He asked me if I was there and I said you drove me over."

"Thank you, lady. I would rather you weren't ashamed of me."

"Then he asked if you drove me home and what time it was."

"Sink him," said Cloudesley.

"I said you did, after we'd had dinner and I was back before ten."

"That must have made him think me a stick. He don't know how strict you are, lady. Poor me. But no odds. The bluebottle would have got it from fat man Fortune. I was moping round the pub just after ten and Fortune made contact and talked wet. I was with him when we saw the balloon go up."

"Don't!" Sally shuddered. "It's ghastly."

"Forget it. It was quick. I've seen men who had it slow. Not so good."

Lo

Sally turned away from him. "Oh, you're cruel, you don't feel anything, you're so cold about it all."

"That won't go, lady. Believe me. What do you want me to say? I'd have given something to save poor little Davis. For Carter—I don't know. You saw him at my pub the day before. All on edge, wasn't he? The haunted man. Do you think he was sorry to get out? I do not."

"Did you tell the inspector that?"

"I give nobody away. I told him I hadn't seen Carter at Filton. Anywhere, any when. Did you?"

"No. But he kept asking. Tommy," she looked into his eyes, "do you believe Carter was drinking himself drunk because he killed Davis and then just crashed?"

"Yes, that's my idea of it," said Cloudesley slowly.

"The inspector doesn't think so. He was asking me if I was with you all the time."

"God bless him!" Cloudesley's solemnity relaxed into a grin. "So you were, after I finished with the dogs."

"I know. I told him so. But then he asked me where Carter parked his car and where yours was."

"He would. He put it the other way round with me. I haven't a guess where Carter put his car. Have you?"

"Of course not. And I know you didn't touch it, I know! But you see, he thinks something was done to the car to make it crash and blow up—Carter was murdered too—oh such a horrible way!"

"Steady. He's just buzzing round. They're hot and bothered they couldn't fix the Davis thing on Carter. But it's all wet. I don't see how Carter's car could be fixed to go up."

"Has that Fortune man asked you about it?"

"Not a word. He just loafes about half asleep except at meals. Then he goes good. Talking of meals, Sally, I go the bundle on my tea. Where is it?"

"Do you really believe Carter killed Davis?" she asked.

"It's my bet," said Cloudesley, and went to her pantry.

"There's nothing else—now?" she persisted.

"Not that I know." Cloudesley began to cut bread-and-butter.

About that time or a little later, Christabel Biggs ran her car off the road below the Knob and went through the heather after the crimson shirt which contained Hugh Gower. Neither seeing nor hearing her, he strode on, chest out, head back, declaiming to himself, it is too likely, his own poetry. She chirped at him other verses.

"Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere,
Destroyer and preserver, hear, oh hear!"

He swung round upon her scowling. "Shelley to you," said she. "The authentic Percy Bysshe."

"Damnation!" said Gower.

"Oh, boy!" she laughed. "Stung."

"You have a voice like a starling. And its manners. Why do you plague me with your squeaking?"

"All for your good, sonny boy. Wake up. The police are after you."

"They employ you? Or you them? I knew they were for sale."

She giggled. "I want you for a pet. Your eyes get so mad. And you don't mean a thing."

"No, ma'am. Nothing within your comprehension."

"Sure. And I know enough of you to make you hang yourself. But that's all right, boy. I'll never tell you the worst. Now listen. This bull inspector is pawing the ground to get you. He's been at me for an hour over what you were up to at Filton show."

"When?" Gower glared at her.

"I've only just choked him off."

"What did your imagination invent for him?"

"Don't be silly. I told him I saw you doing the high-brow in a bunch of the proletariat and off on their 'bus very

matey with 'em. But he wanted it over again backwards and sideways and inside out. Mind your step now!"

"You flatter me, ma'am. I don't thank you for it."

"Of course you don't. Baby hates having his face washed."

"Your friend the inspector was inspired to interrogate me earlier. So your impertinent warning happens to be superfluous."

"Said he, knowing the language. Come down. So he checked up what you said by me. Get that."

"I disappoint you again. I declined to say anything."

"Golly! You would!" She gave an angry laugh, her eyes flashed at him.

"It may interest you to hear that the policeman professed an equal curiosity about you and your friends and your cars."

"Not a bit. He worked that on me too. What did you give him?"

"Now I have your real purpose," Gower sneered. "You may be easy, ma'am. I gave him nothing. If it is possible, I trust the police even less than your friends. We all know that the wretched Davis was murdered by Carter for commercial purposes and the police carefully muddled the evidence to conceal it. How Carter met his death does not interest me. It was rough justice, whether by an accident or thieves falling out."

"Who's your thief?" she cried.

"All of you," Gower laughed. "You are living on the work of others. As well live on the blood of others."

"What work have you ever done? Carter—he may have been a scoundrel—he'd made a decent living for a crowd of people at the works. You—you never made bread for anybody. And what are you doing now? Carter's daughter, her life's smashed. You played with her before, you don't lift a finger for her, you——"

"I told the truth," Gower broke in, flushed and loud.

"I told those fools on the jury she was a helpless child used to decoy Davis to his murder. Did anyone listen? Did you and your friends help her?"

"Have you? Have you seen her since?" Christabel came near him, as red as he.

"I've tried. She wouldn't see me."

"Can you wonder?" Christabel laughed, but her rage grew paler.

"Have you been with her?" Gower demanded.

"No. She wouldn't let me in either," she frowned at him. "Gosh, what a hell of a mess!"

Gower scowled back. "Ay, this is hell, nor am I out of it."

They stood close, eyes meeting eyes, for some moments of silence. "Oh, sorry," said she, and held out her hand.

Gower looked at it before he condescended to take it limply. She laughed. "Kind fellow! Now you play up." He turned and strode off down the slope. She watched him out of sight before she made haste back to her car.

The cool of the evening was falling. Above Christabel's path on the green track of the Devil's Highway, a horse of mediæval paces ambled with Mrs. Carson. Ludlow rode at her shoulder, making his impatient hunter wait on her. He saw Christabel and touched his hat. Mrs. Carson looked round. "Joe! Don't forget you're dining with me," she called.

Christabel waved to them and ran on. Before the red car streaked away over the hill Ludlow had turned and was galloping back home.

CHAPTER XXI

THE POOL IN THE COMBE

REGGIE LAY DEEP in a chair of the lounge, smoking with closed eyes his first pipe after dinner. The head of the dog, Dingo, was laid upon his knee and sighed. He pulled an ear in slow rhythm and Dingo leant against him heavily.

The telephone rang, a door was opened and shut. Dingo stiffened to the alert, and, as a light footstep came along the passage, stood up. Cloudesley crossed the lounge to put a hand on Reggie's shoulder. "Please, sir."

Reggie opened his eyes and was on his feet in one movement, took Cloudesley's arm and marched out with him. "Yes?"

"Noke rang up for you. He says Miss Carter has been fished out of a pool in the combe. They've taken her to his place."

"Ring Ranford. Tell him to come along with stimulants. Strychnine injections." Reggie ran off to his car.

He drove into a little crowd of people at Noke's door. They announced him with shouts. "Bill! Bill! Here's doctor come."

On the stairs Noke appeared in his shirt sleeves, his dark face glistening wet. "Mr. Fortune? Come right up, sir. We got her between the blankets with hot bottles. We been doing the motions."

Reggie followed him into a little room, white and neat and smelling of herbs but of stifling heat from a blazing fire and human bodies. Two men were working at the arms of the girl in the bed, an old woman bent

over her, dabbing brandy on her brow, holding salts to her nostrils.

"Open a window," Reggie gasped. "Open all the windows." He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. "Now let me see." He put the men and the woman aside.

The girl lay on her back. Her face was livid, her parted lips pale, her eyes closed. He felt for her pulse, he opened the flannel nightshirt which had been put on her and put his ear to her still chest . . . He turned her upon her face and knelt astride her, pressing his weight down on her and rising again in slow, steady movement. . . .

"Noke," he looked over his shoulder. "Can you do this?"

"I got the hang of it, sir. And you're a muck of sweat."

"Carry on then. About fifteen a minute. I'll give you the pauses. . . ."

Ranford hustled in. The labours were stopped, injections were given, and they worked on. . . .

It was long after midnight when Ranford's dreary, tired stare at last drew a nod from Reggie. "Yes. We're beat." He breathed deep, he laid the girl's body to rest on its back again and smoothed the dank hair from her wan, miserable face. "We had to try, child," he whispered and moved slowly away.

At the door he stopped and turned and beckoned Noke and said to him: "Another room." Noke shambled downstairs, struck a match and lit the lamp in a stuffy parlour, shut the door and drew the curtains.

Reggie sank into a chair. "Well?" he asked.

Noke stood before him, arms akimbo, black brows drawn down over dark eyes that glistened in an intent, humble gaze. "Yes, sir," he said hoarsely. "You said to look after Miss Carter. And I took notice. I done what I could. I watched out for her. But I never seen her since the inquest. I don't believe she ever left the house till now. I got Adam Baigent, he's the Carter's gardener, to

give me a word how she was doing, and if she went anywhere. Just on dusk to-night he came on the 'phone, missy had gone walking up along, making to the Knob combe. You know, that's where she found the maid's flower and give it to Davis, Midsummer Eve."

"Oh yes?" Reggie smiled awry. "'Magic plant whose power will decide, If the coming year is to make me a bride.' It did. She is a bride. Now."

Noke flinched and brushed the back of a hand across his brow. "God ha' mercy!" he muttered and his eyes showed fear. "Look, do you think she was feeling like that, poor maid, when she went questing alone in the dark there where she picked her man, warm and lusty?"

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Natural she would go some time. However. Where did you come in?"

"I went straight down to the combe, spon as I had the word from Adam. Pitchy dark, it was, along by the water. There ain't no moon, you know, and no blinking light in the sky, it's all overcast, I couldn't see nobody. I didn't hear nothing till I heard a splash and a yell. That come from higher up the combe. She must ha' gone on fast or Adam was slow to give me word. I run on up and I saw someone swimming about in the big pool. I calls out: 'What's here? What's to do?' I says and he sort o' screams: 'Woman drowning,' says he. 'Come on, damn you,' he says. So I went in after him. He dived, and he come up with her and we got her out. Senseless, she was then. I carried her up here. He couldn't help up much. He was just about all in. Then I got the folks to give a hand with her and 'phoned for you."

"Very clear and full," said Reggie. "Except on one point. Left the swimmin' man without a name."

"Didn't I say? It was Mr. Gower."

"Well, well. Why was it?"

"Sir?"

"Any explanation from Mr. Gower?"

"He told me he saw missy go up into the combe and was walking along after her and she fell into the pool and he jumped in to get her out."

"Where is he?"

"He went off before you came. When we got missy here and still she hadn't come round, he blew up. I'll say he was done, but he got all queer, cursing blind at us, nobody nor nothing was any blinking good, missy was dead and gone for all of us, and everything was ruddy hell. Then he barged away, going blind, and tumbled down. Some of the lads picked him up and took him home."

"End of a perfect day," Reggie murmured and stood up. "Well. Try again to-morrow. Knock up Mr. Gower and bring him along to the combe bright and early. I want you both."

"That's all right with me," Noke was quick to answer. "Will six o'clock do you, sir?"

Reggie looked at his watch and sighed. "I shall be there. Good-bye."

As he went out Ranford met him coming from Noke's telephone and in a voice charged with reproach told him: "I have informed the police, Mr. Fortune."

"My dear chap! You think of everything," Reggie purred. "I'm so vague."

"They will take up the case to-morrow."

"Thanks very much. Now we can sleep." Reggie drove away through the misty dark. . . .

Mist was still upon the hills in the morning, but no more than a glimmering, silvery veil when he went down into the combe, taking the path along which he had followed Fay Carter and Davis on Midsummer Eve.

In the depths of the combe the air struck cold, but though no ray of sun pierced it yet, the mist was drawn up out of it, it was clear. The dense growth of St. John's wort rising from the stream was now so full of bloom that it cast a golden glimmer over the dark water.

Reggie stood still a moment. "And she could only find one flower," he murmured, "And that made evidence her man was murdered. 'Too late for love, too late for joy'. Oh, get on, Reginald!" he rebuked himself, and hurried down the dew-drenched path.

The stream, confined in the deep, narrow cleft of the combe and sped on by its sharp fall, flowed fast and noisy over brown rock.

After a while the wooded slopes on either side were lower, and receded, the combe widened and flattened out and became a green glade in the gloom of circling pines. There the stream spread into a still, black pool.

The path by which Reggie came turned from the bank, shunning the marshy verge. He squelched through that and picked his way round the edge of the water. Great mace reeds grew out of it, by the bank spears of iris were dense and clumps of meadow sweet in starry fragrance. The water at the bank was no dangerous depth, he could not see a sign that anyone had broken through the plants.

But after a while the ground grew harder, the bank became bare and dropped sheer to deep water. The glade narrowed, the wood closed in steeply as if there were no way down, but the path came back to the pool and led on beside it. In a little way he saw through the trees foam and spray where the pool broke over a dam of rocks to the lower levels of the combe.

He moved very slowly. The wood reached the pool. The path was a carpet of pine needles over stone. He had come almost to the end of the pool when he stopped. There were puddles before him, the pine needles had been trampled into mud. A raw hole in the bank showed that a stone had been broken away not long before, and beside the hole were smears of green slime.

He was poring over the place when he heard footsteps. "Lord love you! Look at that now," Noke's throaty voice

came through the trees. "He's got the very place. Ain't he a wonder, Mr. Gower?"

"Good morning," said Reggie. Shepherding Gower before him, Noke arrived.

"Morning to you, Mr. Fortune, sir," he grinned. "You're an early bird. I had a bit o' trouble getting Mr. Gower out. But here we are."

"Thanks very much." Reggie contemplated Gower with closing eyes. He was not a pleasant sight, his long hair tousled about a red-eyed, haggard face, so pale that the unshorn black stubble looked like filth.

"What the devil do you want with me?" he roared.

"Only the truth," said Reggie. "Is this where Miss Carter was brought out of the water by you and Noke?"

"Yes, blast you, anyone can see that."

"Like to have the operator's evidence. You agree, Noke?"

"Quite right, sir." Noke licked his lips and watched Gower.

"Well. More evidence required. Nobody but you saw her go into the water, Mr. Gower. Show me where she went in."

Gower swung on his heel and marched back to the point at which the path, climbing from below, first reached the pool.

"Here?" Reggie asked, and studied the ground.

"Somewhere here," Gower muttered. "I'm not sure to a yard."

"It could be," said Reggie. There was some moisture on the pine needles, no sign of trampling. "Here," he looked round. "As soon as she came where there was water to drown her. How did she go in, Mr. Gower?"

Gower swore at him. "She must have fallen, of course. It was damned dark. I heard the splash and ran on and jumped in."

"Of course," Reggie repeated. "Very dark, was it?"

"Yes," Gower roared. "It's gloomy enough here now. It always is down here in the woods. And last night with the mist—bah!"

"I'll say it was a dark night," said Noke.

Ashespoke shaft of sunlight broke at last through the misty sky and woke the black water of the pool to gleaming laughter.

"God!" Gower put his hand to his eyes.

"So you didn't see her go in?" Reggie asked. "How far were you away?"

"I don't know. Not very far."

"Why were you following her?"

"I wanted to speak to her. I hadn't seen her since her father's death. I'd called at the house and she wasn't well enough to see anyone, they said."

"Oh. When was that?"

"I went last night. I was going home again when I saw her on the path to the combe, so I went after her. If I'd only caught her!"

"Well. You wanted to speak to her. Why?"

Again Gower swore. "The girl was living in misery."

"And you meant to help her out?"

Gower tossed his head, clenched his fists, made a step forward.

"Better not," Reggie drawled.

Gower turned and rushed away.

"Lor' love you," Noke chuckled. "You got him in a sweat, sir. He's mean, ain't he?"

"You think so?" Reggie gazed after him dreamily.

"Where were you when the splash came, Noke?"

"Ah, matter of fifty yards behind Gower. I couldn't rightly say."

"Pity," Reggie murmured. "Good-bye."

He sought his breakfast with the speed of anguish. But afterwards he drove down to the Carters' house and talked to Noke's friend, the gardener, Adam Baigent. Then he went on to Merchester.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DAUGHTER

THE CHIEF CONSTABLE, said his secretary, would not be in that morning. Inspector Lucas had gone out. "Zeal, all zeal," Reggie murmured. "Tell 'em I'm waitin'."

He wandered in the by-ways of Merchester, found a jumble shop of promise and beguiled the time there, emerging, the owner of a pair of old decanters, to eat a simple, solid lunch.

Thereafter he found the chief constable and Lucas together and they received him morosely. "I hear you have been making enquiries of your own into this last dreadful affair, Mr. Fortune," the chief constable complained.

"Meaning the girl? Yes. Done what I could. Which is nothing. And you, major?"

"It's a shocking tragedy."

"As you say. Tragedy is the word. For once. Victim of fate. Sacrifice to the powers of evil, that child. What are we for? Rather bitter question. Too late, too late. Saw a lot, controlled nothing. Well. It's over, for her.

"You should have wept her yesterday,
Wasting upon her bed:
But wherefore should you weep to-day,
That she is dead?"

"I am not to take it lightly, sir!" Lacy exclaimed.

"Lightly!" Reggie's voice rose. "Oh my Lord! What are you doing about it?"

"You have not helped us, Mr. Fortune. May I ask if you have formed any opinion of your own?"

"Cause of death, drowning. No sign of injury or struggle on the body. No trace of violent action by the pool except where she was pulled out. On that evidence, accident or suicide."

Lucas cleared his throat. "As far as I can get, I agree, Mr. Fortune. But there's this funny stuff about Gower asking to see her, hanging about and following her up, and old Noke too."

"As you say. One at a time though. About Noke. I asked him to watch out for her after the Davis inquest. That's why he was there. About——"

"Wait, wait!" Lacy broke in. "You warned Noke to watch her—that is to say you expected an attack on her?"

"I wouldn't say that. No. A possibility. I thought something might happen to her. The Davis murder havin' broken her down."

"You mean she was likely to commit suicide," said Lucas. "That's what I think. And then, her father being killed too, she'd be like mad."

"As you say," Reggie murmured.

"You believe it was suicide?" Lacy frowned at him. "I remember you hinted at that before, you compared her to Ophelia——"

"I did," Reggie shivered. "I was afraid. No help! Knew a lot, didn't I? Similar causes, similar effect. Ophelia died by water—accident or suicide, they said. Ophelia hadn't nice people round her."

"She was driven to death," Lacy's frown deepened.

"Yes. Bein' weak. So was Fay Carter."

"That scoundrel Gower!" Lacy exclaimed.

"I wonder. He is a factor. Difficult animal, our Mr. Gower. However. He hadn't been let see her. Till last night. He didn't speak to her then. His evidence. Noke's evidence too. Other people were let into the house and talked to

her. Did you get that, Lucas? Mrs. Ludlow called. Mrs. Carson called. She saw both of them. Miss Biggs called. She didn't see her."

Lacy made an impatient noise. "It's only natural and decent that ladies should call and condole with a girl who has had tragic bereavements."

"Kind ladies," Reggie drawled. "However. Both Mrs. Ludlow and Mrs. Carson were at her yesterday. And Miss Biggs, whom she wouldn't see. Same like Gower. And yesterday night she was drowned."

"That's saying they worried her to death," Lucas nodded. "I've known women go like that."

"Oh yes. Yes. It does happen. People are so kind. Anything more about the people who could have managed her father's death?"

Lucas breathed hard at this sharp turn of the conversation. "Ah! I've done some work, I give you my word." He spread a folder of papers.

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap," Reggie encouraged him. "Sound and thorough."

Lucas looked down his nose. "I do my best, sir. Now here," he unfolded a large scale map of Filton, "see this: this is where the fair was on the town meadow. I've marked out the car park in red, the big, black oblong is the refreshment tent, the little one the bar by the five bob stand where Carter was seen in the afternoon. Now——"

The door was opened. "Mr. Geoffrey Ive, sir," said the chief constable's secretary.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FATHER

IVE'S PRIM LEAN person entered and the chief constable arose to receive him with ceremony.

"Well, well," Reggie smiled. "A felt want. Public prosecutor sittin' up and takin' notice. Come on, Ive."

Ive gave him a chill glance. "I am deeply obliged to you for coming down at once, Mr. Ive," said Lacy. "We were much in need of your advice, and since I wrote to you there has been a tragic development." He told the story of Fay Carter's drowning. . . .

"Deplorable," said Ive, and again glanced at Reggie.

"My dear Ive! Inadequate. The major said tragic. Le mot juste. Lover murdered, father murdered, daughter—driven out of life. Forces of evil dominant down here."

"You have no evidence of foul play in Miss Carter's death," said Ive.

"Lawyer," said Reggie. "Physical action, no, no evidence. Fear and grief, yes, one dam' thing after another. She was murdered as plain as Davis was murdered. Though not by hand. Are we downhearted? Yes. However. Fight it through. We were on her father's death. Go ahead, Lucas."

"Well, sir. I have it Mr. Carter put his car in the park here when he arrived, early afternoon. As to his coming to the show at all, by my enquiries, Mr. Cloudesley is right. It wasn't Carter's habit to go to agricultural shows."

"No. I thought my Cloudesley told the truth on that. Problem one. Fundamental problem. Why did Carter

go to Filton? You wouldn't expect him to be feelin' special festive last week."

Ive looked sideways at Reggie a moment.

"I don't know," said Lucas. "When a fellow's had a bad time he does often like to put up a stunt he don't care and splash about a bit."

"You're very good," Reggie smiled. "So sane. So fair. However. Second problem. Who was with Carter at Filton? How did he splash there?"

"Ah, that's a teaser. He don't seem to have been with anybody much—if you believe what they say."

"I shouldn't. Till compelled."

"No, sir. But in a manner of speaking, in a general way they do confirm each other."

"That is kind. And helpful. Well?"

"It's clear enough Carter was round about the stand and the refreshment tent all the afternoon, and he didn't leave the show ground till about seven. I have it he took a few drinks. The girls at the bar didn't notice anybody with him. Now beginning with Mr. Cloudesley—he drove over first thing with Miss Milburn, him being one of the judges of dogs. He put his car in the park, he says he don't know where Carter had his. Mr. Cloudesley was busy with the dogs till five o'clock. Miss Milburn spent the day going round the flowers and vegetables and poultry. Both of 'em, I took 'em separate, said they didn't see Carter at all. But there's this. Mr. Cloudesley took my enquiries his usual sharp, happy-to-meet-you style, you know. Miss Milburn was sticky, sort of slow and dull, I mean. I had the idea, she might be sitting on something. Well, anyhow, they tell the same tale, they had tea in the show tent, they went to the prize giving and the speeches and about seven Cloudesley got his car out of the park and drove her to the Crown. Here's the Crown on the plan, you see, top of the High Street where the road from Hurst comes in. Cloudesley put his car in the yard and he

had dinner with Miss Milburn and then drove her home. She says she got in by a quarter to ten. He says he was back at his inn before ten."

"Tellin' the truth," Reggie murmured. "As near as no matter. I met him just after ten strollin' around. So Cloudesley and lady left Filton nine fifteen or so. And Carter's car blew up about eleven. If he came straight from Filton, he was there till near ten forty-five. An hour and a half after Cloudesley was gone."

"That's what I made it, sir." Lucas looked at him, expectant of more.

"Looks like . clearin' Cloudesley," Reggie's eyelids drooped. "I should have said the hole was made in Carter's tank near the time he started. Lose a lot of petrol, even with that little drip, in an hour and a half. And through that hour and a half, what was Carter doin'? Where was he? But you're not satisfied about my Cloudesley. Nor am I."

"There is more to it, sir. After the show Carter went to the Crown Inn too. Both Cloudesley and Miss Milburn say they didn't see him there. That's as may be. He didn't have dinner, only a sandwich or so in the bar, and sat drinking whisky. They might very well have missed him. All the same, his car was in the yard of the Crown with Cloudesley's quite a while. The devil of it is, I can't fix the time Carter got there. He must have driven away from the show before eight. No one at the Crown can tell me when he came, nor when he left neither. They were very busy, being the show night, and they had an extension of hours for it, open till eleven. There it is. Cloudesley had a good chance at the car, and nobody else from Hurst was at the Crown."

"Awkward for Cloudesley. What about the yard? Anybody notice a sniff of petrol there?"

"The yard man didn't notice anything special."

"He wouldn't. No. However. Some indication tank was punctured in the Crown yard, between eight or so and ten forty-five. Too much time, Lucas. What was Carter doin' for some three hours? Not drinkin' steady, havin' drink taken before. He'd have been helpless. He only drank whisky. And on very little food. But no one from Hurst met him at the Crown."

"Nobody the landlord knows, and he would know the people to signify. Carter wasn't seen talking to anyone, he drank solitary, they always notice that in pubs. Now, about the others from Hurst. When I got on to Gower, he tried his usual high-brow bullying to put me off. But I soon had him wild, and then he can't help talking free. His story is he went over with a bunch of lads in Carter's works on a private bus. Just like him. He always wants to do the gentleman sucking up to the proletariat. They got to the show about three o'clock, had a go at the sports, and stayed to the finish. They drove off to supper at the Green Man, that's the pub here on the plan, in the Merchester road, and their bus left for Hurst close on ten. I've checked on all that, and it stands up."

"It would. Yes. But their pub is only a stone's throw from the Crown. Our Mr. Gower or one of his bright young things from Carter's works could easily come across and puncture Carter's tank."

"I won't say they couldn't," Lucas agreed.

For the first time Ive spoke. "You wish to connect Carter's death with trouble over his factory, Fortune?" The tone was sardonic.

"Try everything," Reggie murmured.

"Quite," said Ive.

Lacy intervened. "May I point out, Mr. Ive, we have evidence of this fellow Gower's mischief-making among the work people and of his—er—his activity in close relation to each of the three deaths, Davis's, Carter's and finally Miss Carter's."

"I have remarked it," said Ive, and began to draw on a blotting-pad.

"Mr. Ive wants more," Reggie murmured. "Other people, Lucas?"

"Well, I went the round, sir. Noke was at the show for an hour or two, saw Carter in the bar and came away about five. Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow went late in the afternoon, five or so, they had tea there. Mr. Ludlow told me he saw Carter by the tent but only to nod to. Mrs. Ludlow didn't notice him. Mrs. Carson came along to tea with 'em and she don't remember seeing Carter either. After tea the Ludlows went home. Mrs. Carson met a lady friend, the wife of the vicar at Filton, and was asked to dinner, had dinner at seven, left quite early, nine or so, didn't see Carter in the town. Then there's Mr. Troove, he went over by bus to see the flowers, don't remember seeing anybody. He wouldn't. And he came back and took his evening service at six. Now this only leaves Miss Biggs. I don't know where I am with that young lady, she talks your head off. It may be just natural, but she gave me the idea she's got the wind up, or trying to hide something."

"My Lucas!" Reggie sat up. "What did she say?"

"That's just it. She didn't say anything for all the chatter. She hadn't seen Carter at all, she'd just seen Gower going off on a bus. She'd only talked to Mrs. Ludlow and Mr. Troove."

"Oh. Curious and interestin'."

"You mean the anonymous letters," Lucas nodded. "I thought of that."

Ive looked up from drawing his pictures and asked: "Of what?" Lucas told him, showed him. His thin voice read out: "'WOT ABOUT PARSON'S WOMAN.' Dear me. Is the imputation that the cleric has an affair with Mrs. Ludlow, the squire's wife?"

Lacy made an exclamation of disgust. "Muck raking, sir. Half-witted scandal."

"Without any basis?" I've looked at Lucas.

"Meaning is it true?—I don't believe it," Lucas said with a disciplined eye on his chief. "The sort of basis is, Mrs. Ludlow does go reg'lar to the church alone. She was there the afternoon when Mrs. Carson got that queer knock out. She still goes, everybody knows it. And now this young lady, Miss Biggs, brackets the parson and Mrs. Ludlow. That's what Mr. Fortune means is curious. I'll say it is."

"Quite. When did you receive the letters?"

"The Tuesday after the Davis inquest ended—and now just after Carter's killed, Miss Biggs sort of hands us the story again."

"Very curious, I've," Reggie murmured. "Bafflin' person, our Miss Biggs."

"The letters came on Tuesday last," I've turned to him and spoke incisively. "Not only after the inquest, Fortune. After the newspaper suggested that the condition of Carter's works was related to Carter's murder."

Reggie's face was without any expression. "As you say. Connection not obvious. However. There are other points. Our Mr. Gower and Fay Carter were round about the church when Mrs. Carson's head was broke."

"That conveys nothing to my mind," I've told him.

"No? Well, well. Try again. Mr. Gower was in Filton with lads from the works handy to stab Carter's car. And our Miss Biggs just saw him going away on a bus. Interestin' and curious."

"The suggestion is——?" I've asked acidly.

"Open the mind," Reggie drawled. "Let in our Miss Biggs. One of the factors. Any more of her, Lucas?"

"In a way there is. She kept talking, how dreadful it was for poor dear Miss Carter, her man being killed like that, and then her father, the girl must be worse than dead herself—and how could anyone do such things? She used language you don't expect from a young lady,

not even now, 'bloody' and words like that, 'there must be a devil of a brute did it.' I couldn't help but get the idea she was trying to work me up to give away what line I had. And you see she kind of took it for granted Carter was murdered. Why should she? I'll swear nothing's got out, and on the face of it his death looks like an ordinary car smash."

"You are good, Lucas," Reggie purred. "State of mind of our Miss Biggs full of interest. Yes?" he glanced at Ive.

"The argument has no weight," said Ive. "You are always an impressionist, Fortune. I quite accept the inspector's assurance that no leakage from police sources has occurred. But the mere fact of his zealous enquiries showed everyone he approached that the police did not regard Carter's death as an accident. Surely, Fortune, you must have foreseen such a consequence."

"Oh yes. Yes. Intended it," said Reggie cheerfully. "Urgent need of action. To get reactions. Under pressure of fear. Only power we have."

Through some moments of silence Ive surveyed him with a bleak stare, and then remarked: "An emotional theory. I am not to congratulate you on the results. This young woman has indeed reacted to your—pressure. Unless she is mentally deficient she could not fail to show alarm and distress at the suggestion that another murder had been committed here of which she might know something. Her reaction proves nothing whatever. Your power," he sneered, "is powerless for any good."

"My dear old chap!" Reggie's blue eyes grew round. "No rash haste. Legal mind in a hurry. Shockin'. Well—our Miss Biggs is not deficient. No. All there and more. Very vigorous little female. Female plus. However. Did you happen to think the police should have asked no nasty questions?"

Ive's thin lips were compressed. "I agree that this is a case for full enquiry."

"So kind. Any lingerin', legal doubt Carter was murdered?"

"We have no question of law yet, we are solely concerned with the interpretation of facts."

"Quite so, Mr. Ive, quite so," the chief constable broke in with exuberant satisfaction. "I'm very glad to hear you say that. It's exactly my view. I am by no means satisfied Carter's death was not accidental."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed, looked at Ive and asked wearily: "How is the Public Prosecutor interpretin' the facts?"

Ive's composure was ruffled. "The facts before us are inadequate," he told Reggie. He turned to Lacy. "On the other hand, sir, I must advise you our experts agree that the injury to the tank of Carter's car was caused by a tool deliberately applied. Carter's death cannot be taken as accidental. It should be investigated as a murder. On the facts which you have thus far been able to discover, I can, however, find no clear indication of the guilt of any person."

"Oh no. No," Reggie murmured. "Contrariwise. Very well done, these Hurst murders. Somebody playin' a great game in great style. Any suggestions, Ive?"

Ive ignored him. "My advice must be, major, that you should arrange for the inquest to be opened with formal evidence and then adjourned, giving no hint of the proof of murder which you can produce. Then you may proceed with the most careful and quiet investigation."

"My dear old thing!" Reggie purred approval. "Sage and sound. The only way."

Ive stirred and gave him a sidelong glance.

"Uphill, yes," Reggie murmured. "Too much time. What was Carter doin' for three hours? Who did he do it with? Too many people. Wouldn't be so bad, that. But there's too many forces. 'Uphill all the way—yes to

the very end.'” His round face hardened in an expression of cold curiosity. “Stayin’ to help us, Ive?”

Ive turned to Lacy. “I shall remain for the present, major. After the adjournment of the inquest I should like to examine the financial position of Carter and his factory.”

“A felt want,” said Reggie, and wandered out.

CHAPTER XXIV

BACKGROUND

IN THE HALL Reggie stopped and asked after the family of the duty sergeant.

He was giving advice on the male baby when Ive came out briskly. "Jolly little sinner," he concluded. "Hullo, Ive. Fixed it all up? Swift fellow. Can I give you a lift?"

"Thank you. I am staying at the Bull."

"Honest food. Frowsty rooms. Come on." Reggie led the way to his large car. He put Ive in, settled down low in the driving seat and let the car slide away. "At last alone," he murmured. "Out with it."

"I don't understand you," said Ive.

"I know. I know. Painful strain on your discretion, that conference. Saw you burstin' to say what you really thought of me. Always happy to relieve the official mind."

"Your self-satisfaction is enviable," said Ive.

"My only aunt!" Reggie twisted the car round a double-decked lorry of sheep and made it leap to speed between two buses. "Go on talkin'."

Ive braced himself in his seat as the car swung about the market cross of Merchester. "Surely this is not the way to the Bull, Fortune."

"No. To the open road. You want to say a lot. Frowst of your old pub cramps the style."

"You are an irresponsible creature——" Ive began.

"Me?" Reggie was hurt, and trod on the accelerator. The car shot away, passed the town's ultimate building, the new hospital, and reached the heaths which spread away to Hurst.

Ive took breath again as the worst of the traffic was left behind. "You have acted with extraordinary levity. I suppose you will not deny now that you gave the cue for that deplorable newspaper attack on Carter's works."

"My dear chap! Official mind will underrate the intelligence of the Press."

"You have not forgotten that you boasted to me of its effect on Carter's company. Your object was to drive him into financial difficulties. You believed that you had succeeded."

"I don't boast, Ive," said Reggie sharply. "Expect causes to have effects—pressure to bring results. Carter murdered his partner Davis with confidence there couldn't be any proof of murder. Underratin' my intelligence. I failed to convince a local jury. But I did alarm the sensitive financiers. And I showed you I had. So what?"

"What indeed!" Ive retorted. "Your useful result is that Carter has been murdered, too, and his wretched daughter is drowned, God knows how. Are you proud of that?"

"No. Not proud of anything. Yet," Reggie murmured. "The girl!" He drew a long breath. "No help for he anyway. I came here too late. She was broken. She hadn't any life left."

"If she killed herself, it was because her father was killed. You'll not deny that. And you bear some responsibility, to put it low, for his death."

"It could be," said Reggie quietly. "In a muddle, your mind, Ive. The girl first. The murder of Davis broke her. How much did she know or guess? We shall never be sure. But something. Then her father got killed, and kind people came and rubbed it in, and she joined Davis. Well. Her father was murdered. No regrets from me. Murderer himself. Dabbled his daughter with the blood of the man. His genial life was forfeit. Though we couldn't

take it by law. Well. It's been taken. That's all right. Now we have to deal with Carter's murderer. And so draw to an end." He turned dreamy eyes from the road to Ive. "I wonder."

"Good God, man, do look where you're going," Ive jerked forward. "There's a block ahead."

"I had noticed it," Reggie drawled, slowing to let lorries with trailers from the Jove Radio works pass a standing bus. "Congested, this Hurst affair. That's the recurrin' difficulty. Things will cut in. Well. Business as usual at Carter's factory." He held the car to a crawl past the gates and they saw another lorry loading, men busy in the sheds, heard the hum of machinery.

"Did you expect to stop it?" Ive asked.

"Oh no. Don't want to. However. One of the possibilities. Carter must have been hard pressed to murder his partner so he could sell the place to a company. Up to you, that side. You might make something of Carter's papers. If the relevant stuff is on record, which I doubt."

"Your whole theory depends on the assumption that Carter's financial position was desperate," said Ive. "It must be possible to discover how his affairs stood from his accounts."

"Hopeful fellow!"

"You wish to discredit anything I may find in advance. I quite understand your embarrassment. You anticipate I shall destroy the theory you have acted on so recklessly."

Reggie swung the car off the main road into the lane which led past the church to the hills.

"My dear old thing," he sighed. "Oh no. No. Not you. You'll get the position of the factory all right. You won't get Carter's position. Why was he murdered? Remember how he was murdered. Brilliant and sound. With a shade more luck for the murderer—if that hole in the tank had

been destroyed in the explosion, if I hadn't been here, if I hadn't been on the spot good and quick—the bit of tank with the hole in would never have been found. Whoever worked all that out saw a long way ahead. You won't find there's anything left in Carter's stuff to show who had to murder him."

"Your ingenuity is very fertile," I've answered. "But you have ceased to be plausible. The theory was that Carter murdered Davis for financial reasons. Now you require me to believe that the same financial reasons were the motive of someone unknown for murdering Carter, yet no record of them will be found."

"That is the theory. Speakin' roughly. As officials do."

"It is incredible," said I've.

"Hasty mind, your mind. What was Carter doin' for hours of mystery at Filton? Seein' somebody about something urgent. It had to be personal, you notice. It had to be secret. I should say Carter had nothing in writing to use against the somebody. Or if he had, the somebody got it or it was burnt in the car. Very likely there was nothing written. Carter was murdered because he'd be dangerous to the somebody if he lived to talk. Quite clear."

I've laughed disagreeably. "You will never be without an answer, Fortune. You are most imaginative when you have no sort of reason for your theories. But as everything is so clear to you, may I ask who is the unknown somebody who murders for reasons of company finance of which there is nothing on record?"

"No answer," Reggie mumbled. "Hasty question. Think again. I said some financial reasons, difficulties of Jove Radio, behind both murders. But they didn't work same way. They couldn't. Nature of things. Murderer of Carter might be somebody inspired by Davis' murder—somebody bothered by difficulties of Jove Radio—somebody with a grudge against Carter."

Again I've laughed. "Admirable! In fact, the murder might have been committed by anyone in Hurst."

"Not anyone. Someone with a brain. But there are several brains livin' here. And a passion or two."

"You become profound"—I've sneered—"to end in the obvious. It has been an instructive conversation. May I now return to my hotel?"

"My dear chap! Have some tea with me." Reggie pointed through the trees. "There's the famous church. Church of our Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Ludlow and the anonymous letters. Looks the world forgettin' by the world forgot, don't it? Lonely with its immemorial past. And down behind on the flats, a buzzin' eruption of modern industry. The man Carter must have had some power to make a livin' out of the waste here for hundreds of folks. And then—crash. Sad world. Now we turn up to the eternal hills and my Mr. Cloudesley's genial inn. Smell the heather. Honeyed sleep."

"I beg your pardon," I've broke in. "I must go back to Merchester. I have work to do."

"Sorry. Just givin' you the background. Lots of background. Where the glass flashes, that's our Mrs. Carson's villa. Rather exotic. Flashin' over hill and dale to Mrs. Ludlow's brown house. Solid respectability."

I've jumped as the car swerved on to the verge of the heath and even so only just avoided the downward rush of a red sports car. "Keep calm. More background. That was Miss Christabel Biggs. Very bright young thing. Neck for sale as usual. Takes a lot of interest in the little troubles of Hurst. Lots of ladies. Very confusin'."

"You are suggesting——?" I've asked, rather pale and breathless.

"Confusion of forces. Yes. That is so. Some passion about. Cuttin' into the great game. Tiresome. However. Be patient yet. Broadly speakin' that's the background. With my Mr. Cloudesley, old Noke and the dark and

desperate Mr. Gower. And there's more things true than they've told. Well, well. You want to work." Reggie turned into a descending lane and took the fretting Ive back to Merchester at a speed which held him speechless.

CHAPTER XXV

SEARCH

BRIEF AND DISCREET, the inquest on Carter heard only, before it adjourned, Cloudesley's evidence that he saw fire on the Filton road and found a car crashed and Carter dead inside, evidence from Reggie that the cause of death was burning and inside the man was much whisky.

That afternoon Reggie went up to town, but the next day he returned and sought Ive and found him at police headquarters studying papers and account books. "Thought you'd like to know. The City story is, Jove Radio wanted big cash and wanted it bad."

Ive took off his spectacles to glare. "I do not require Stock Exchange gossip, thank you."

"Got that out by yourself? No liquid capital, runnin' on an overdraft—and so on. Splendid. Anything else? Oh don't be cross." He wandered out.

It was after six when he reached the Knob Inn again. Cloudesley, lying on his back in the heather with his head in Sally's lap, felt her stir and turn. "Don't do it, lady," he reproached her, "you belong to me."

"I thought you said Mr. Fortune had gone away."

Cloudesley blasted Mr. Fortune and sat up. "So he had."

"That's his car, isn't it?"

"Jemima! Back again!" Cloudesley whistled. "Bless his baby face. He can't bear to leave me. I'll make my pile out of fat man Fortune."

"Oh, why does he come back?" said Sally. "It's horrible! He makes me feel cold. And something ghastly always happens."

"As you feel the cat creates the black beetles. He is rather a pussy cat."

"Ugh!" Sally shuddered.

"But look at that!" Cloudesley pointed. The dog Dingo stood on the alert watching the car. As Reggie got out he bounded forward, stopped, wagged his tail hard and barked. "Calling the beggar. Can you beat it?"

Reggie waved to the dog, received another joyful bark and vanished. Dingo returned to them wagging and prancing, exhorting them to welcome his valued friend.

"No, old man," said Cloudesley, "lady don't think you're a judge."

Dingo poked his nose into her hand, as she stood up looked back, as she moved away looked up at her, and wagged again and followed sedately.

"On the whole he prefers us," said Cloudesley. "There's a compliment."

"Tommy! Why must he come to you?" Sally asked.

"That's a compliment too. Fortune likes my pub. And he knows what's good, bless his bright blue eyes."

"Does he like you?"

Cloudesley's solemnity puckered in a grin. "He likes you, lady. I've seen him look at you."

"Ugh!" She made a face.

"And he don't mind using me. Can do."

"Do you trust him, Tommy?"

"For a secret service bloke—not so worse."

It was impressed on Sally as he took her home that all this happened after half-past six. They saw Troove coming away from the church, they saw the sexton locking its door. So the evening service was well over. Moreover, Cloudesley looked at his watch at her gate and said he must double back, the animals were fed from seven on.

Reggie, when he has the chance, is old-fashioned in his dinner time. He was eating before half-past seven, which

afterwards made him thankful to providence and his simple, earnest nature.

He had settled down in the garden with his coffee and a cigar before Cloudesley came to salute his return. "I hope all was in order, sir? Very glad to have you back so soon."

"Always prepared, aren't you? Fascinatin' place. Found I could get down again. Couldn't resist." The dog Dingo snuffled at his legs and deposited a yearning head on them.

"You've made friends," said Cloudesley. "That dog knows more than a bit."

"Like his master, what? You do me proud."

Dingo moved back, pricked his ears and walked away to the road and stood watching. They heard the thud of a horse on soft ground.

The sun had not sunk below the hills, though its rays came pale through films of cloud. The light fell on a man riding fast up over the heather.

Cloudesley's eyes puckered. The man had no hat, his grey hair was tossing above an ample brow. "Mr. Ludlow, I think," Reggie murmured. "Some hurry."

"He often rides in the evening," said Cloudesley brusquely.

"So late?"

Ludlow stopped at the inn and shouted: "Is Mr. Cloudesley there?"

"Sir!" Cloudesley made haste to him.

Reggie squirmed round. Ludlow had not dressed for riding. Grey flannel trousers were rucked up from suede shoes. The usual composure of his strong, kindly face had gone, under its flush and glistening sweat, it betrayed anxiety. Reggie wriggled down again and sat still.

But Ludlow had no secrets to keep. His voice came loud and harsh. "Have you been here all day?"

"Here or hereabouts," Cloudesley answered. "I walked down the hill after tea."

No

"What time?"

"Six to seven."

"Did you see Mrs. Ludlow?"

"No, sir." Cloudesley paused. "I hope there's nothing wrong."

"I don't know what there is. She went off with flowers for the church this afternoon. She hasn't come back. I've just ridden over by the bridle path. I can't find her. I can't find a trace of her. Troove says he wasn't in the church in the afternoon, he doesn't know whether she was there or not, but she certainly wasn't there at the evening service. One of my people saw her crossing the park. That was before three. I want to find somebody who can tell me which way she went. I've turned all the men out to search. Her maid didn't tell me she'd not come in till short of an hour ago. You must have seen her sometimes going to and from the church. Did she ever use one of the paths up here?"

"Not that I know of," said Cloudesley. "I shouldn't have thought she'd come up over the hill. Is she strong enough for that, sir?"

Ludlow was silent a moment. "No, she isn't. I shouldn't have let her walk at all. But she loved it. So you've never seen her except on the path to the church and back?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't, sir," said Cloudesley. "Of course she might have gone some other way. As I see it, the most likely thing is she did, and tired herself out and had to stop and rest. I'll look around up here and put my lads on it."

"Do, that's a good fellow," Ludlow was answering when Reggie crossed the garden to them.

"My name's Fortune, Mr. Ludlow. Couldn't help hearing. Sorry. I——"

"Good God, sir, I don't mind your hearing. I want everyone to hear of it and do what they can."

"I should like to. There is a point. Not yet certain

if Mrs. Ludlow ever entered the church. You said Troove told you he didn't know whether she'd been there or not. But he should know. He had an evening service."

Ludlow and Cloudesley frowned at him, then frowned at each other. "Do you mean he's lying?" Ludlow asked.

Cloudesley took that up. "You can be sure she wasn't at the service, Mr. Fortune. I saw some old dames coming away myself and the sexton after 'em and he locked the door. They'd all have noticed if Mrs. Ludlow had been inside."

"Useful evidence. But not on the point. You show she didn't attend the service. That don't prove she never reached the church. One obvious test. If she did, she would have changed the altar flowers. That's what she went for. Troove ought to know whether the flowers were fresh or stale at his service."

"Damn the fellow," Ludlow muttered. "He must know," and, turning his horse, galloped off across the hill.

Reggie ran indoors, came back with an overcoat and ran on to his car, calling: "With me, Cloudesley." Cloudesley jumped in as he started and the car rushed down into the darkening twilight.

"What's the manoeuvre, Mr. Fortune?" Cloudesley asked

"Want to get to the parson as soon as Ludlow. Your Mr. Ludlow's feelin' explosive."

"Do you wonder?"

"Oh no. No. Most natural. Like him for it. So you think Mrs. Ludlow is not strong?"

"Have you ever seen her?"

"Yes. I agree. You have good eyes, Cloudesley. I wonder."

The church rose out of the shadows. Reggie slowed only just in time to swing round the hairpin turn up the lane to the rectory. They arrived at the door to see Ludlow jump from his horse and hammer at it.

It was opened by Troove himself. "What now?" he cried. "Have you found her, sir?"

"No, I haven't. I want something more from you. Did my wife bring her flowers to the church?"

"Flowers, her flowers?" Troove stammered. "Really, I don't know, I——"

"When you had your service to-night you must have seen the flowers on the altar. Had they been changed since this morning?"

"God forgive me." Troove shrank. "I am shamefully negligent." He gulped. "I did not remark them, Ludlow. I have come—the truth is, you have been so generous with flowers, I—the altar vases are always beautiful."

"So you never look at them," said Ludlow. "You expect me to believe that? You——"

"I say, Ludlow," Reggie called. "Sexton ought to know about the flowers. Try him."

"Yes, very well," Ludlow growled. "I'll see you again, Troove." He mounted and rode away.

Reggie got out of the car, came to the doorway and murmured: "He is in some anxiety, Mr. Troove."

"I am deeply concerned, sir." Troove flinched.

"Yes. You have a key to the church? Get it please. I want to go in. My name's Fortune. You may have heard of me."

"I assure you I have not seen Mrs. Ludlow to-day. Not for some days. Not since Sunday morning."

"I hadn't asked that," Reggie mumbled. "Asked you to open the church. Please."

"I will go with you," said Troove.

"Yes. You had better." Reggie put him into the car and drove off with him.

They came round the green to the church and saw on the far side Ludlow talking to a man and a woman.

Reggie stopped at the churchyard gate, jumped out and hustled Troove up the path to the deep porch, but Troove

fumbled some time with his key before the door creaked open into musty dark.

From Reggie's hand the beam of a big torch flashed through the nave, to the chancel, to the altar. Troove caught at him with an exclamation of horror. "Pray, pray, sir, don't do so. It's wrong."

"Lightening our darkness? That's what we do pray for." Reggie went up the nave, keeping the torch beam steady on the altar. The lilies there shone silky white. "Might light some of the lamps, Cloudesley," he said over his shoulder.

"Very good, sir." Cloudesley went from one hanging oil lamp to another and a yellow glimmer spread through the little church.

"Fortune!" Ludlow called from the door. "Are you there? I've just got the key from the sexton. He says he didn't notice anything about the flowers."

"I do," Reggie answered. He was examining them. "Fresh flowers. Fresh water. Put here to-day."

"Ann did come here!" Ludlow strode up to him.

"That is indicated. Yes." Reggie turned from the altar, swept the torch beam about every corner of the chancel and moved away to the tower transept. The bell ropes came out of black gloom into the lamplight from the nave and cast bars of shadow across the wall painting of the Virgin and Child. He looked up at the sorrowful Mother and bit his lip. "Where Mrs. Carson said she prayed," he said to himself. "God help us!" Then he spoke aloud and sharply. "Troove! When Mrs. Ludlow comes in the afternoon does she ever—sit—here?"

"I—I really couldn't say, sir," Troove stammered. "I have so seldom been in the church at the time."

"Oh. Do you happen to know, Ludlow?" Reggie flashed his torch at the picture and Troove groaned, then turned it upon the rush chairs and the bare, rough stone floor.

"My wife is fond of that painting," Ludlow came to him. "Why, have you found something here?"

"No." Reggie walked past him to the curtains which hid the other transept and drew them back.

"There is nothing there, sir," Troove cried.

Reggie went in. As the torchlight searched past the surplices on the western wall they were quavering. Cloudesley ran at them. "Let 'em alone," said Reggie. "Only the draught from pullin' the curtains back." His torch turned from the praying desk to the vestment chest and lingered there. He moved to it, bent over it. "Did you use this to-night, Troove?" he asked.

"No, indeed, sir. I only wear the surplice at week-night evensong."

Reggie opened the chest gingerly and looked in. Troove came up behind him. "Please, please, I must protest——"

"You have. Yes." Reggie shut the chest again. "Don't touch anything."

He turned his torch again upon the surplices, and the light showed once more a ripple in their whiteness. "Still movin'," he smiled awry. "There is a draught." He pulled the curtain away from them. The black door in the arch behind was not quite closed. But it would not open till he put his shoulder to it and then it moved slowly, groaning. A flash of the torch showed scraps of broken stick jammed underneath. He threw the flash on into the gulf of the crypt for a moment, then brought it back to the steps and went down slowly, scanning each one, and picked up a chip of stick.

Ludlow and Cloudesley and Troove crowded after him. "You stop on the stairs," he said and went on alone across the floor of the crypt. From the dark where they stood they saw the ray of his torch spread across the ruins of the altar to the stone coffin over against it.

Then he put the torch on the floor and the crypt was all black-gloom but for the stab of light at the coffin side and

the faint rays thrown up from it on his face and hands as he moved the planks which covered the coffin.

He picked up the torch again, cast the rays within the coffin and bent over it, and the only break in the dark was a dull reflection upon the rough hewn stone of the roof through which shadows of his head moved grotesquely.

Ludlow plunged forward with a shout: "What are you doing? Have you found something?"

Reggie stood up. "Yes. Your wife," he said slowly. "She's unconscious. She's badly hurt. She is alive."

Ludlow snatched the torch to flash it into the coffin. He saw his wife's face dabbled with blood and dirt, her grey hair tumbled about it, matted with blood, her dress twisted and torn. On either side of the lolling head the light glistened at the damp bones of the long-buried dead on which she lay.

Ludlow roared the oaths of a man mad with pain, but only for a moment. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "Here," he thrust the torch into Reggie's hand and gathered his wife into his arms and lifted her out of the coffin. "You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes. Can't do anything here. Take her to my car, Ludlow. I'll go home with you. Show him a light, Cloudesley. They might want you, Troove. Get on."

He was left alone in the dark of the crypt. Then he struck a match and bent over the coffin again. He took out a basket which was crushed upon the faded flowers within it, struck another match and put his left hand in a handkerchief before he used it to lift from the bones a car spanner. About that he wrapped the handkerchief and, inserting it in the basket, went up to the church again. But at the crypt door he stopped to pull out the scraps of stick jammed beneath.

"Chance? Or design?" he mumbled. "However."

Under the lamps in the nave he sat down and wrote on the fly leaf of a prayer book.

Ludlow stamped in shouting: "Fortune! Where are you? Come on, for God's sake."

"I will," said Reggie, wrote another sentence, tore out the page and went after him as he strode away.

Troove was waiting in the porch. "Can I—can I do anything, Mr. Fortune?" he stammered.

"Not here. No." Reggie shut the door and locked it.

"Please, please, you are taking my key, sir."

"Yes. That is so."

"But I need it. I have early communion at seven."

"Wait and see."

"I am not to submit——"

"Go home, Troove. Stay there. You'll be wanted." Reggie thrust him out of the porch.

"I—I—very well," Troove gasped. "Oh, but you can't close the church so with the lamps burning. Pray let me go in and extinguish them."

"Vital issue!" Reggie laughed, and hurried through the churchyard calling: "Cloudesley!"

"Sir!" Cloudesley met him, and was given the page from the prayer book.

"Get on the 'phone with that quick. Ranford first. Then the police. Make' em jump to it. And after—get your car, bring Troove along to Ludlow's."

"Very good, sir." Cloudesley ran off.

"Fortune!" Ludlow's voice rose furiously from the waiting car.

Reggie came to it, looked into it at the woman lying huddled across the floor with Ludlow's coat making a pillow for her blood-stained head. "Yes. Best you could do! Now! Get in." He passed behind, put the crushed basket into the luggage compartment and locked it.

The car purred away with them from the glimmer of the lancet windows in the empty church.

CHAPTER XXVI

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

REGGIE CAME OUT of Mrs. Ludlow's bedroom with Ranford and a young doctor on the staff of the Manchester hospital.

They crossed the corridor to a room opposite. "Well?" Reggie asked.

Ranford was pale and agitated. "I have nothing to suggest, Mr. Fortune. I can only say that I see little hope for her."

The young doctor was silent, watching Reggie with intent expectation.

"Not an easy case," said Reggie. "Depressed fracture of skull. Much effusion of blood. You're her doctor, Ranford. Any history of her heart?"

Ranford cleared his throat. "She has suffered from cardiac disturbance—irritable action—I think the heart is enlarged."

"So do I. Cause?"

"I have attended her some ten years," Ranford became oratorical. "I am not aware of any physical cause for the innervation of the heart. I should incline to attribute it to emotional strain. She was not strong, she was older than her age when she first consulted me. Her early life had been sad. Her only brother was killed in the war, at that loss her father had a stroke and became a helpless invalid. She did not marry till after his death, she was then over thirty. Though she found happiness in marriage, and I have never known a more devoted couple, it distressed her deeply that she had no child."

"Oh yes. Yes. Heart got worse since you knew her?"

Ranford frowned. "She has not consulted me often. In my opinion there was deterioration. I warned her that she must live very quietly."

"Warned her husband too?"

"Certainly. I thought it my duty to tell Mr. Ludlow that any great exertion or shock would be disastrous, and even with the utmost care I could not feel confident."

"So he knew. Well, well." Reggie moved to the door.

Ludlow sat at the desk in his study, a tray of untouched food pushed away from him. He was bent over the writing pad, one hand held up his head, the other twitched and scrabbled with a pencil.

He did not hear them come in. When he saw them he started up. "How is she? What are you going to tell me? Can you do anything?"

"She is as she was," said Reggie. "The injury to her head is dangerous. She has lost a good deal of blood. She's only just alive. But there is something we might try. Transfusion of blood. Give her blood from somebody else."

Ranford put his hand to his mouth. The young doctor's eyes glanced at him for a moment and were again intent on Reggie.

"Yes, of course, try it," Ludlow said eagerly. "I'm ready. You'll take mine, won't you? How do you do it? Shall I go up to her?"

"Steady. You have the first right, Ludlow. But we must test your blood first. It may not suit hers. Has to match. Often have to try several people before we find one who will do."

"If you would come with me, Mr. Ludlow," said the young doctor, and took him away.

Ranford glowered at Reggie. "I will go back to the patient," he announced as he stalked out.

Reggie rang the bell, and when the butler came, asked him: "Anybody been telephoning about Mrs. Ludlow?"

"Yes, sir. We have had a number of answers."

"Answers?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ludlow gave instructions to ring up and enquire of the houses round for any news of the mistress."

"And they kept on answerin' they had none?"

"Well, sir, they had not, but it was rather their enquiring from time to time if she had been found."

"I see. Anybody in particular enquire?"

"Miss Biggs has rung up more than once. Mrs. Carson was speaking only just now."

"Told 'em Mrs. Ludlow had been brought home?"

"I told Mrs. Carson, sir. Miss Biggs was put through to Mr. Ludlow himself. I beg your pardon, sir, but Mr. Cloudesley and Mr. Troove are here, and Mr. Cloudesley asked to see you."

"When I ring," Reggie dismissed the butler, turned the telephone directory on the desk, found Gower's number and called him. There was no reply. "Well, well," he frowned and rang the bell.

But the door was opened as he rang and Christabel Biggs rushed in, to stop short and pant at him: "Gosh! You!" Her face was flushed and damp, her wild hair glistening wet. A long coat fell back from a bedraggled silk dress, from legs sodden and dirty. "Where's Mr. Ludlow?" she gasped.

Reggie smiled awry. "With a doctor. Did he happen to tell you Mrs. Ludlow had been badly hurt?"

"Of course he did. How is she?"

"She is still. Where did you ring him up from?"

Christabel flushed darker, her eyes blazed. "If you mean the last time, from Mr. Gower's. We've been all over the hills looking for her."

"Oh. Where is Mr. Gower now?"

"I don't know. What——"

The butler brought Cloudesley and Troove. Cloudesley's solemnity admitted no surprise at the sight of Christabel.

Troove's lips moved without a sound before he gasped: "Miss Biggs!" He shrank back, his eyes fixed on her in a stare of horror.

"Thanks, Cloudesley," said Reggie. "Told you you might be wanted here, Troove. You are."

"Why, why, is Mrs. Ludlow now conscious?" Troove stammered. "Mr. Cloudesley said he didn't know what you wanted."

The door was flung open and Ludlow strode in exclaiming: "I'm no good, Fortune, so your fellow says. Can't you try—my God!" he stopped as he saw who was in the room.

Christabel came forward, held out a dirty little hand to him. He took it and dropped it, looking past her to scowl at Troove.

"Yes, we will try others," said Reggie, and explained to them. "Want a transfusion of blood for Mrs. Ludlow. Do you people mind giving some?"

"No, no," Christabel cried. "Let me."

"Have to test till we get blood that will suit," Reggie told her. "Troove?"

"Yes, indeed, I should be glad to serve," Troove answered slowly.

"Me too," said Cloudesley.

"Come on then." Reggie led them upstairs to the room where the young doctor had his syringe, tubes and microscope, and left them there.

As he went down again he saw the butler conducting Mrs. Carson to the study. He followed her in. "This is too dreadful," she was saying huskily. "Poor Ann! Is there any hope?" Ludlow stood before her with head bent.

"One thing we're trying," said Reggie.

She started, she looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Mr. Fortune isn't it? I didn't know. I am glad. You were so kind to me."

"Thank you. You might help now."

"I?" She flung back her cloak in a gesture holding both arms to offer anything. "Tell me."

"Want to find someone with blood like Mrs. Ludlow's who would give her a little. She's lost so much. Transfusion, you know."

"Could I?" Mrs. Carson cried. "I should love to." She looked down at herself, she was in evening dress under her cloak, she drew the gloves down from her elbows. "Take me."

"Thanks very much. Don't know if we can. Let's try."

She gave Ludlow a smile, she held up her hand. "Let's hope," she said.

"Good of you," he answered quietly, but the fierce despair of his look remains in Reggie's memory.

Mrs. Carson was brought to the testing room, and exclaimed amazement at those others there before her. "Joe! Have you volunteered? But how splendid of you! And Mr. Troove!"

"I—I understand that I am of no use," Troove stammered.

Reggie joined the young doctor at the table, glanced over his notes, murmured: "Quick as you can," and went out.

He opened the door of Mrs. Ludlow's bedroom. The only light in it showed him her sunken, pallid face and a nurse beyond. In the grey shadow behind the lamp Ranford sat watching her, his hand on her wrist.

Silently Reggie came to the other side of the bed. Ranford looked up at him. He bent over her . . .

He stood up and drew a long breath. "Yes, she's gone," he murmured. "Well."

"She passed so quietly, sir," said the nurse. "I don't think she suffered at all."

"No. Merciful," Reggie smiled awry. "Thank you, nurse." He wandered out of the room.

Ranford came at his elbow. "I never had any hope,

Mr. Fortune," he complained. "There was no chance of saving her."

"As you said," Reggie mumbled.

"I could not think it a case in which transfusion of blood would be of any service."

"Better not say that," Reggie answered. "Always try everything. Blood for blood. Very useful sometimes. If you can get it right. However. Come and tell Ludlow."

"I am afraid we have given him useless hopes," Ranford said bitterly.

Ludlow sat as they had found him first, sunk in a chair at his desk, head on hand. But now he did not rise, he only turned a stern, sad face to meet them. "I am most deeply sorry, Mr. Ludlow——" Ranford began.

"Don't talk," Ludlow cried. "Is it—is she——"

"She is dead," said Reggie.

Ludlow nodded. "Go away, will you?" he groaned. "Take everybody away." He stood up, thrust past them.

From the hall they saw him climb the stairs heavily and go into his wife's room. "Poor fellow, he is stunned," Ranford whispered. "I feared it."

"Yes. That is so. However. Do as he said."

"What did he mean by taking everybody away?"

"Kind people who were havin' their blood tested. I'll send 'em off. See you at the post mortem, Ranford. Good-bye."

He went up again to the testing room. "Oh, Mr. Fortune, how is she?" Mrs. Carson cried. "The doctor says I can't help her, but I couldn't bear to go."

The young doctor looked up from his microscope. "I think Miss Biggs would be suitable, sir, if we might ask her?"

"Ask nothing. I'm ready," Christabel snapped.

"Too late," Reggie answered. "Thank you. All of you. Couldn't save her."

Mrs. Carson hid her face in her hands and sobbed. Troove crossed himself and his lips moved silently. Christabel gazed at Reggie, her dark eyes wide and aflame, her cheeks white. Cloudesley's jaw and chin hardened. "That's bad," he said.

"Yes. Well. What could be done is done. Ludlow wants to be left alone. Please." Reggie opened the door for them, ushered them to the stairs. When they were gone down he came back to the young doctor and said softly: "You got 'em all? Good. Work out the blood groups. See you to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVII

AND SO TO BED

AT THE FOOT of the stairs, the butler stood, looking up, sniffing, wringing his hands.

"My dear chap," Reggie murmured.

"Thank you, sir," he shook and wiped his eyes. "It's very dreadful, sir. Mrs. Ludlow was the kindest lady. I beg your pardon, Mr. Fortune. I am having trouble with the police. Inspector Lucas came asking for you some time ago. I told him I could not possibly disturb you, but he has made himself most unpleasant, if you would say a word, it's not right."

"Too bad. Where is he?"

Lucas had been put into a back room, the office for tenants on business. "Well, Mr. Fortune, you have held me up!" he stormed. "When I got to the church it was locked and the sexton told me you'd gone off with the keys, and I've been here an hour or more and couldn't make these blasted flunkeys let me have a word with you."

"Don't blame them. Quite right. I've been busy. Mrs. Ludlow's only just died."

"She is dead! My God! Did you get her to say anything?"

"Oh no. No. Don't suppose she knew anything. However. It was murder. Better see what you can do about it." Reggie opened the door and went swiftly along the corridor, along the hall.

"I like that!" Lucas fumed, striding after him, caught him up as he left the house. "I might have done more than a bit by now, Mr. Fortune."

"You might. Why did you come here? Should have been seeing people. Told you to."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Fortune. I know my duty. I wanted to inspect the church. If you——"

"Well, well. Zeal, all zeal. You shall inspect the church. Get into my car. Faster than yours."

Reggie jumped in and, as Lucas leant out calling his own car to follow, took him off in a rush which threw him back spluttering wrath. "We are in a hurry now! If you hadn't locked the church and gone off with the keys——"

"It might have been all messed up," Reggie finished the sentence.

"Meaning me, sir?" Lucas roared.

"Oh no. No. Before you got there."

"What, you think there's clues somebody might have come in and cleaned up?"

"It could be," Reggie murmured.

"Have you somebody in your mind, Mr. Fortune?"

"Oh no. No. The mind is open," Reggie sighed. "Told you to look for somebody. Your job. See people. Ask 'em who was round the church this afternoon."

"I did ask at the cottages there on the green. I only got about Mr. Ludlow and you finding her and going off with her and locking up."

"So useful. And then you gave up."

"What would you have had me do? No one but those cottage folks lives so they'd see coming and going at the church, and they didn't."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Lots of other people in Hurst."

"Was I to spend the night knocking up the whole place?"

"Might have begun," Reggie sighed. "Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?"

"Lots of things. When Mrs. Carson had her head broken
Og

in the church, the sagacious Noke was handy. So was our Mr. Gower. Might have asked them where they were this afternoon. You've had Troove bracketed with Mrs. Ludlow by anonymous letters and by Miss Biggs."

"That's right," Lucas muttered, "there is all that, but what a tangle, and there's no lead. You took the parson with you, sir, what did you make of him?"

"State of shock. But he said he wasn't at his church till the evening. I had Miss Biggs also. She came unasked. I wonder. You might have begun with comrade Gower. However." The church windows glimmered through the dark. "Here we are." He swirled the car to a sharp stop. "Now you'll see what you shall see." Taking a small case with him he jumped out.

They went into the church and he flashed his torch about the nave. "Mrs. Ludlow was struck on the head from behind and above. More than one blow. I don't know where she was when first struck. But probably kneeling." He came to the chancel. "She had been there. She'd put her fresh flowers on the altar." Lucas switched on a torch of his own and looked everywhere. "See anything? No. Nor do I. No blood, nothing, no sign of movement." Reggie went into the tower transept. "Ludlow said his wife liked that picture." He swept the torch beam from it to the floor and the chairs. "Again no blood. Yet she was bleeding." He crossed to the curtains of the other transept, but stopped short as the light of the two torches fell upon them. "Well, well," he sighed. "I missed that. I was rather in a hurry," he picked something off the curtains.

"What is it, sir?"

"Some grey hairs. Long hairs. I should say Mrs. Ludlow's hair. Probably she was dragged through here unconscious after the first blow. Well." He turned his torch through the doorway to the crypt. "Bits of stick on that step jammed under the door when I came. Probably broken

from her flower basket. Basket was crushed. I should say she fell on it or the murderer trampled it. It was carried down and put in the coffin with her. Come on."

They went down and the torches searched the rough, damp floor. "Can't trace any blood on that. But there are lines. You see? Where her heels dragged along. She didn't bleed till she was hit again. But there——" He turned the light of his torch into the coffin and showed blood thick upon the long dead bones.

Lucas muttered and gulped.

"Not nice, no. There the murderer hit to be sure of killing. In a passion. Ah, that's her hat. You might take it, Lucas. I have her basket and the weapon—car spanner."

"What! The murderer left his weapon down here!"

"Left it in the coffin with her. Curious. Both victim and weapon hidden in the coffin. I should say our murderer got hot and bothered. Didn't mean to work it quite like this. Steady your torch on the planks here, will you—just here." He laid his own torch down, he stooped and opened his case. "Planks were covering the coffin when we came here before, do you remember? They'd been put on again after she was smashed inside. Yes, I thought so." He cut away a piece of the rough edge of one of the planks and put it in a tube in his case.

"Why, what have you got, sir?"

"It's a blood stain."

"Blood!" Lucas gasped. "My God! There's enough in the coffin, if you want that."

Reggie did not answer. He scanned the planks again, and shut his case and took his torch and went up out of the crypt and turned to the vestment chest. His torch beam moved slowly along the lid to a dull spot on the dark shining oak. "Put your light on this," he said, opened the case, washed the spot clean with wet lint and put that into a tube. "More blood, I think," he murmured. "If you don't mind, Lucas." He opened the chest, took out a

stole, a hood and held them up in the light. "So that was it," he said. On the back of the stole were damp, dirty smears. "Used to rub something clean," he gave a little twisted smile. "'Out, damned spot, out, I say'. Well, well, that will be all, my Lucas." He dropped the hood back in the chest and closed the lid. He gathered the stole delicately and turned into the nave. "Oh. The lamps." He looked up. "Turn 'em out, Lucas. Parson didn't want any light burning."

"The parson!" said Lucas fiercely, but he obeyed, and they left the church in darkness.

"Now you're just going to begin, aren't you?" Reggie's voice came silky as they walked away.

"In the middle of the night?" Lucas stopped. "What's to do?"

Reggie told him. . . .

Lucas punctuated the instructions with grunts and rumbles of growing excitement, but at last: "That's a job and a half," he muttered gloomily. "All over the shop. Very well, sir, I'll get going. I'll try to cover it."

"My dear chap!" Reggie encouraged him. "You will. You'll go big. Good-bye."

He made haste to his car, he glanced back at the church as he drove away. "And so to bed," he murmured, and sat back and watched the sky in the east where the first faint glimmer of dawn was rising.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SOS TO THE CHIEF CONSTABLE

REGGIE WOKE RELUCTANTLY to behold the broad and shining countenance of Bunyard in a grin above his bed. He rolled away. "Oh no," he moaned.

"Good morning, sir. Just gone seven, sir," said Bunyard blithely. "There's a police sergeant come with a letter for you. Which he says he must give it into your own hand."

"Bless him." Reggie sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Bring him."

The sergeant was dirtily unshaven, his clothes also wanted attention. "From Inspector Lucas, sir," he droned and produced a rather fat buff envelope.

Reggie took from it an unclean handkerchief and laid that aside and found a memorandum form:

To Mr. R. Fortune.

From Inspector T. Lucas.

One enclosure.

Had difficulty in obtaining admission to H. Gowers' cottage. Gower was wearing pyjamas when he opened the door and abusive. Stated he had been asleep for hours. To question where he was when rung up from Tillingmere, replied in bed. To question why Miss Biggs telephoned to Tillingmere from his house, replied he met her searching for Mrs. Ludlow and she used his telephone to get the latest information. Further questioned about her and himself got violent and attempted to eject me. In the course of this I observed scratches on his wrists

and arms and, resisting him, some blood came from these on to my hands. Wiped off by me on my handkerchief enclosed for examination by you.

Reggie jumped out of bed and went to the writing-table and wrote an answer of some length.

"Get that to Inspector Lucas at once."

"At once!" the sergeant echoed dismally. "Sir, the inspector's only just come into the station here for a wink of sleep."

"Wake him up. With my compliments. Quick!"

An hour later Reggie drove up to the Merchester Hospital and found the young doctor of the blood tests working in his modest laboratory.

"Very early bird," he applauded. "How are the worms?"

"I did some work on 'em before I went to bed, sir. I haven't quite finished. Mrs. Ludlow's blood is of Group II, Miss Biggs is in Group II also. Mrs. Carson Group I. Just working on Mr. Troove."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "Pity Mrs. Ludlow and Miss Biggs are the same. Hard world. Deceptive world. Confused and confusin'. However. Try to tidy it up a bit. Here you are, my lad. Exhibits one—two—three—" he brought out the tubes which held the stains from the coffin side and the vestment chest, he unfolded the smeared stole—"exhibit four—" he laid down the handkerchief stained from Gower's scratches. "You want to know what blood group each of these belongs to."

The young doctor's earnest eyes were excited. "I see, sir," he almost smiled.

"That's the spirit," said Reggie. "Go on hopin'. Exhibit five—" he unwrapped the car spanner which he had found with Mrs. Ludlow in the coffin—"I'll do some work on this. . . ."

The chief constable did not begin his working day so early. He was a man of method. The schedule time for

him to reach his office was half-past ten. At ten o'clock he sat at home smoking the first and last cigarette after breakfast and waiting for the wireless to give him the morning weather bulletin. His garden wanted rain.

The wireless spoke. "Here is an S.O.S. The Mershire County Police request that anyone who was in or near the parish church of Hurst, Mershire, yesterday afternoon between the hours of two and six o'clock will communicate at once with the police headquarters, Old Road, Merchester, telephone Merchester 11."

For once the chief constable broke a rule. He did not wait to hear the weather forecast, he reached his office before half-past ten.

His deputy could not tell him who had asked for the broadcast, knew nothing about it. He rang up the regional broadcasting station and learnt that the message had come from his chief inspector Lucas. He hardly controlled his emotions. He bade his deputy find Lucas.

But Lucas had not come back. Lucas's home had not heard from him. The police station at Hurst reported that Lucas had had a couple of hours' sleep there and gone out again soon after eight, leaving no instructions where he would be.

The chief constable asked his deputy what things were coming to and carried his horrified mind to consult with Ive.

Ive, emerging from study of the books of Carter's factory, received him bleakly. He had been talking some time before Ive discovered what he was talking about, and interrupted. "Make it possible for me to understand you, major. I must have these facts in order. What do you actually know? About ten o'clock last night Lucas was informed by telephone that Mrs. Ludlow had been found dangerously injured in the church at Hurst and reported to you that he was going there to investigate. Some time after midnight you had another message from him that she had been removed to her own house and died there and he

had informed the coroner and was remaining to make further enquiries. Since then you have heard nothing from him but this broadcast message. Is that the present state of the case?"

"Precisely," said Lacy. "You see it's most irregular. Lucas's conduct amazes me. He has no authority for such action."

Ive compressed his thin lips. "I am not to give an opinion on police discipline. Inspector Lucas appears to be a zealous and energetic officer. You would seem to have given him a free hand. It is a first principle that no time should be lost in the investigation of a murder."

"Murder!" Lacy exclaimed.

Ive did not conceal a sneer. "Surely you realised that Inspector Lucas found reason to suspect the woman was murdered. Why else should he work all night?"

"It's impossible," Lacy gasped. "It's incredible! Mrs. Ludlow! She—she's a saint of a woman. She's adored by her people."

"I should not consider that a reason for taking her sudden death from injury as of no importance," said Ive acidly, and Lacy flushed and scowled at him. "This is not the first mysterious death in Hurst. Mrs. Ludlow is not the first woman who has been injured in the church."

"Fortune said the other woman's case was an accident," Lacy retorted. "You are suggesting I neglected my duty, I ought to have gone out myself. I don't accept that. I resent it, Mr. Ive. I had no reason to think Mrs. Ludlow was murdered. I don't believe it."

Ive shrugged. "I am far from suggesting you should have dealt with the case yourself," he sneered. "Whether it was murder or not we shall discover soon enough. Fortune is still in Hurst."

Lacy snatched at the telephone and rang up the Knob Inn and asked for Mr. Fortune and told Ive furiously: "He's not there. They don't know where he is."

"You will hear from him," said Ive. "I shall be interested, major."

Lacy stamped out.

During this conversation Reggie was in the mortuary with Ranford and Mrs. Ludlow's body.

A knocking on the door disturbed them. The keeper of the mortuary was sorry, sir, but the chief constable had rung up, said to tell Mr. Fortune he wanted to speak to him at once, most urgent.

"My compliments to the chief constable," Reggie snapped. "I want him to wait for me."

The work went on . . . "Well?" Reggie asked.

"In my opinion there can be no doubt, Mr. Fortune," Ranford announced. "The cause of death was effusion of blood on the brain from a depressed fracture of the skull. That was induced by several violent blows delivered from above by a heavy, blunt weapon."

"The weapon as before," Reggie's eyelids drooped. "Yes?"

"There has been degeneration of the heart muscles and the heart is enlarged. I informed you last night I had diagnosed that condition and anticipated that she had only a short expectation of life."

"Quite good," Reggie murmured. "And valuable. Makin' it unlikely anybody who knew how ill she was would bother to murder her."

"Most unlikely," Ranford agreed with vigour. "I should say myself, incredible."

"I wonder." Reggie turned away and took out of his case the car spanner. "About the weapon. What do you think of this? Oh, handle it. Been gone over for fingerprints."

Ranford frowned and grasped it and tried the weight and examined it. "No doubt something of this sort might have inflicted the injury," he said slowly.

"Yes, I think so. Look." Reggie, putting a hand over

his, directed the spanner-head to Mrs. Ludlow's wounds. "Like that."

"Quite, quite." Ranford drew back, leaving the spanner in his hands, and stared at him.

"You thought of something like this in Mrs. Carson's case, didn't you?" Reggie asked.

"I did," Ranford's voice was unsteady. "Certainly I did. But only one blow was struck at her."

"More vicious this, yes," Reggie murmured. "Much more vicious. Also no spanner found with Mrs. Carson. There is a difference. As you point out. Yet a certain similarity, Ranford. Well. The chief constable's frettin' for me. So glad we agree about Mrs. Ludlow. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WAY OF IT

"I HAVE BEEN WAITING for you, Mr. Fortune," said the chief constable in a voice of menace.

"I've been at work, major," Reggie sat down and made himself as comfortable as a harsh chair allowed. "Seen Lucas lately?"

"Lucas has not returned. What——" he stopped as Ive came into the room and looked with a prim, superior smile from him to Reggie.

"Must have been working too," Reggie murmured. "Well, well. Dug anything out of Carter's papers?"

"You may take it that Carter's business was on the verge of bankruptcy," Ive told him. "I find no evidence of anyone but himself being involved."

"As we were, what? On that side. Great game."

"It is a remarkable affair," said Ive. "You——"

The chief constable beat upon his table. "Don't waste my time. Attend to me, gentlemen. These delays are insufferable. What——"

"What about Mrs. Ludlow?" Reggie interrupted. "Oh yes. The other side. You have been waiting. As you said. However. I can tell you the way of it. Mrs. Ludlow walked over to Hurst church yesterday and reached it about or before three o'clock. Everybody in the place knew she always went on Wednesday afternoon to change the altar flowers. She did change 'em. Very soon afterwards somebody struck her from behind and above with a blunt weapon. I have no doubt she was on her knees. I should say she was in the tower

transept praying under the picture of the Virgin and Child."

"Why, but that is where Mrs. Carson was found unconscious," Lacy exclaimed.

"Yes. Curious and interesting."

"And you were certain Mrs. Carson had not been attacked, she had fallen."

"I was. I am."

"Ranford thought she was struck—struck with a blunt weapon."

"He did say so. Yes. A car spanner he suggested. Interestin' and curious. However. Ranford and me are agreed Mrs. Ludlow was stunned with a blow from a car spanner. In the operation her flower basket was crushed. She was then dragged away through the curtains into the vestry transept. I found some of her hair on the curtains. She and basket were taken down into the crypt and put into the stone coffin there. You remember it, major? Covered with planks."

Lacy nodded and muttered: "Go on!"

"Well, lyin' inside the coffin on the bones, she was hit with the spanner again and again. Two blows at least. More violent than the first. I should say the murderer was then rather hot and bothered. After which the planks were put on the coffin again and the murderer departed, leaving the spanner with her. Can't give you the precise time. From the state of the blood in the coffin, it wasn't long after three when the murderer hammered her head there."

"This is horrible!" Lacy gasped. "No, really, Fortune, I can't credit it. It's fantastic. It's not rational."

"Oh yes. Quite logical. Quite reasonable. Given the passion motive. On a common pattern for crimes of passion. Better planned than most. Very well planned. Only the murderer was disturbed in action. However. No use arguing, major. It happened. She was murdered and this was the way of it."

"How can you be sure?"

"My dear major! Oh, my dear major!" Reggie sighed. "I found her in the coffin."

"But why?" Lacy exclaimed. "Don't you see, it's out of all reason? Why should a murderer stun her in the church and take her down to the crypt to kill her and hide her in the coffin? It's a madman's work."

"Oh no. Quite sane. Didn't go according to plan, that's all. Think, major. Murderer for passionate reasons meant to kill Mrs. Ludlow. Knew her habits. No chance so good as when she was alone in church. 'Now might I kill her pat, now she's at prayers.' Same like Hamlet said of uncle. Also the stunning of Mrs. Carson in the transept would suggest the method. Well, murderer, armed with spanner, caught her on her knees. No doubt meant to finish her in the church and quit."

"Yes, I could understand that," Lacy interrupted, "but he took her down into the crypt. There's the insanity."

Reggie shook his head. "It won't do." His round face hardened and the lines of the jaw stood out. "This murderer isn't going to get off as a lunatic. Knew what was what good and well. Heard somebody coming. Up against being found with weapon in hand over an unconscious woman. Dragged her out of sight, hid in the crypt with her. And the somebody was in the church. Thrillin' moments. Footsteps up above, nearer, by the door of the crypt. Put yourself in the murderer's place, major—listenin' to the tread to and fro overhead—might be caught with that body—had to hide it—into the coffin with it, quick—and then—was she dead?—not yet—what if she lived to speak?—any minute some other people might be pryin' round—listen for quiet—not a sound—kill her, make sure—cover her up—listen again—steal out and go. That was the way."

The chief constable, mouth open, brow contorted in puzzled, painful thought, sat frozen, staring at him.

"A brilliant effort, Fortune," said Ive. "In your best style."

"But it's all imagination!" the chief constable exploded. "You don't know that any of this ever happened. There's no sort of evidence."

Reggie's blue eyes opened wide. "We are not amused, major," he said in a small, contemptuous voice.

"Amused, sir?" Lacy roared. "What do you mean?"

"Advisin' you not to be flippant. I don't imagine things. Mrs. Ludlow was brutally murdered. The evidence is clear and conclusive. You won't get any other verdict this time."

"Are you suggesting——"

"I tell you, you mustn't leave a way out for the murderer now. Somebody messed up the evidence in Davis's case. That is not to happen again."

"I am not to accept this!" Lacy started up. "It's insufferable! Your evidence against Carter as the murderer of Davis broke down by no fault of the police. Your effort to prove that Carter's death was murder is hardly to be reconciled with his guilt. And now—of course, if Ranford agrees with you, I admit the medical evidence that Mrs. Ludlow was murdered——"

"You're very kind," said Reggie.

"But the rest of your story—there is no evidence for it at all, it's pure imagination. You are without any sort of ground for your description of the murderer's conduct. Your tale of persons coming into the church and disturbing him has no basis in fact. You have simply invented it. There is not the slightest reason to believe that anyone ever came near the church at the time of the murder."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "You do run on. Why not think? Save a lot of trouble. I haven't found who came and bothered murderer. Up to the police, that. But somebody did. Only way things could have been as they were. However. Murderer's conduct. That I have proved."

No blood in the church. Mrs. Ludlow wasn't hit to bleed till she was put into the coffin. Other facts. Bloodstain on one of the planks over the coffin. Probably not splashed from Mrs. Ludlow. Spot of blood on the lid of the vestment chest upstairs. Stole in the chest smeared with blood and dirt. Murderer used it to clean up, havin' got messy with operations in the crypt. If any of that blood isn't in the same group as Mrs. Ludlow's it came from the murderer."

"Good God!" Lacy cried. "You could identify him from these bloodstains?"

Ive's thin lips curled. "Are you hopeful, Fortune?"

"Not certain, no. It isn't possible to identify blood. May be able to tell you murderer was somebody in Blood Group I or III or IV. Shan't be able to tell you what particular person."

"Then that's all useless!" Lacy glared at him. "Mere scientific futility!"

"You won't think," Reggie moaned. "Well, well. Heard anything of Lucas?"

Lacy made an angry noise and rang the bell to summon his deputy.

CHAPTER XXX

HIKERS

AFTER SOME FRETTING moments Lacy rang the bell again. I've gave a sidelong, sardonic glance at Reggie, who slid lower in his chair and closed his eyes.

The deputy bustled in. "Why do you keep me waiting?" Lacy exploded. "I want to know if you've heard from Lucas."

"No, sir. Lucas hasn't reported. I beg your pardon, I couldn't come for a minute. I had two ladies with me."

"What?" Lacy's veins swelled. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Two ladies came along to answer the broadcast S.O.S. sir. I was listening to their statements."

"You——" Lacy choked. "Why didn't you inform me? Bring them in here at once." The deputy departed with his self-satisfaction unshattered.

"So you sent out an S.O.S., major?" Reggie purred. "That was wise."

"I did no such thing, sir. It was Lucas on his own responsibility. Quite irregular. Good God!" The invocation was a mutter of horror at the two ladies.

They were plump, they wore shorts which were very short, and the amplitude of their legs shone brick red. Having recovered from this, the eye could observe that the red faces under the fair, fluffy hair, though pretty and silly in shape, were desperate earnest. Reggie jumped up to give them chairs.

"Miss Perkins, Miss Trott," the deputy introduced them. "This is the chief constable, Major Lacy. Now, if you ladies——"

"Pleased, I'm sure," said one, and the other chimed in: "You tell him, dear. No, you, dear." To the last Reggie never felt certain which was Miss Trott and which was Miss Perkins. Their story came as an inextricable duet. "It's like this, major. We live in Wanby. We'd often hiked an odd day over the hills by Hurst. So this year we said we'd have a regular hiking holiday round here, it's so lovely. That's quite right, dear. You do feel so free. We got into the sweetest cottage, just under Hurst Knob, on Monday. Mrs. Blaydon's, dear, the major will want to know. Yes, that's right. The old lady's a darling and everything what you could wish. Well, there, we just couldn't bear to leave her place. I believe I kept you, dear. That you didn't. I loved it. Now, you tell him. No, you go on. It's like this, then. We didn't reely think anything at the time, there wasn't anything partic'lar. Only perhaps the young lady was funny, as you might say. But there, perhaps that's fancy, talking it over after. You don't want to put anything wrong, dear. No, dear, I wouldn't, not for the world. You see, major, we heard your S.O.S. on the wireless after breakfast and I said: 'There,' I said, 'What do you think of that?' I said. And I said: 'Well, I don't know what it means,' I said, 'But we did ought to go to the police. You never can tell, can you?' That's quite right. Because we were there, there's no denying, only we don't know anything's been done wrong, major, reely, we don't."

"You're wasting my time," Lacy boiled over. "You're talking nonsense. What do you know?"

They looked at each other, they were plainly affronted. "Well, I must say! We just came here to do the right thing. And not to be spoken to like that."

"Oh no, no." Reggie was paternal. "My dear ladies, you're doin' splendid. The major's worried. Mustn't mind that. Were you near Hurst church yesterday afternoon?"

"I was just telling you. We did a big hike Tuesday so

we said we'd have an easy day. Lazy, you know, just pottering. In the afternoon we toddled along what they call the Devil's Highway to make a round and do the church and the little old cottages. Ever so quaint they are, and we'd always had to hurry past 'em. I always say, you don't reely see the country if you don't stop and look. That's quite right, dear."

"Which way did you go to the church?" Reggie asked, "And when—two o'clock, three, later?"

"There now," the earnest red faces turned to each other. "We were saying, they'd ask that. Yes, of course, dear, they would. We worked it out, see? We came down by the lane that goes straight from the Devil's Highway to the church. It wouldn't hardly have been three o'clock when we came into the lane, because we were just toddling and we got to the church about a quarter past. Yes, that's right, dear. You looked at your watch to see how long we could have before tea and it was just gone the quarter."

"Oh. Fixed point. You reached the church at three fifteen," Reggie turned to Lacy with a benign smile. "Well, well, major. Isn't that interesting?" And Lacy jerked in his chair and bent over his writing-pad and made a note and scowled at it. "Now, ladies," Reggie turned back to them, grave and respectful, "On the way to the church, did you see anyone?"

"Not to say see," their eyes consulted, they nodded. "That's right. But you can be sure there was someone about. It's like this. I don't know if you know that lane, there's the open heath each side and then it goes down steep between trees. Well, just before the steep part begins, there was a car stopped. It hadn't anyone in it, we didn't look for anyone, why should we, but if you think, you see whoever came in the car wouldn't have been far away. Of course not, who'd leave a car there in the lane like that and go right off? If they were out for a picnic they'd drive the car off the road on to the heath."

"You have thought about it," said Reggie. "Good work. Can you describe this car?"

The ladies sniffed in harmony. "I never had a car. I don't understand cars, beastly things, I hate them. You can't hardly walk a road anywhere, not even the lanes, but they're running you down and stinking at you."

"As you say," Reggie sighed. "Too bad. However. Big car, little car, open, closed, colour?"

"It was a great long, red thing, it hadn't any top."

"Red sports car. Thanks very much." Reggie glanced at Lacy but Lacy was still bent over his writing-pad and gave no sign of understanding. "Well, well. And then, ladies?"

"Why, we went on to the church, like I told you, and went in and went all over it. A lovely little old place it is, but that sad, it makes you go all weepy. Yes, dear, I'm sure."

"Felt like that?" Reggie sympathized. "This was three-fifteen and after. You say you went all over the church. Did you have a look at the crypt?"

Lacy sat back with a start. The ladies' eyes met in an exchange of enquiry. "Which is the crypt, dear? I don't know, I thought a crypt was an underground place. There isn't one there, is there?"

"There is, yes," said Reggie. "But you didn't go down? You didn't find the door?" The two fluffy heads were shaken vigorously. "It's by the curtain, behind the surplices."

"Well to be sure! We wouldn't touch them. Poking about into the clergyman's robes? What do you take us for? And you may well ask, dear!"

"No, no," Reggie soothed them. "Misunderstood. All my fault. I just wanted to know, did you see anyone, did you hear anyone, while you were in the church?"

"There wasn't a soul, not when we got there."

"Oh. Not a sound either?"

"Why, how could there be?"

"I wonder. Not in the church. Around or about?"

They looked at each other. "I don't remember noticing. No, dear. The old door made a bit of noise and of course we were moving about, it clatters on the stones and tiles and we were talking."

"Well, well," Reggie sighed. "Did you notice the flowers on the altar?"

"There now. Fancy his asking that," the ladies chimed together. "Didn't I say what lovely lilies? Just perfect, I said, so white and sweet in that sort of sorrowful church. Made you think, they did."

"Yes, they do," Reggie murmured. "Well. Fresh lilies there at three-fifteen. When you got there. But nobody in the church then. And after?"

"Why somebody did come in. How did you know?"

"When? Who came?"

"We'd been there some time. I can't be sure. About half an hour we thought, dear. That's quite right. We made out we got back to tea before half-past four, taking it easy. It would be a quarter to four or so the young lady came in. I don't know who she was. But how could we, dear? A young lady in a green tussore frock and green suède shoes. She was short and dark. She had rather a quaint walk, kind of running, but I did think afterwards that might have been she was flustered. Oh, I wouldn't tell 'em that, dear, we can't be sure reely. No, we didn't ought to say so, it's no more than a feeling, she was sort of funny with us."

"What did she do?"

"There now! She didn't do anything particular. That's quite right. We'd been looking at the picture on the wall in the corner, the Virgin Mary it is, and she came as we were coming away from it and she stopped and I thought she stared a bit too much, you know, what is this the cat's brought in, like these smart young things do look at

you. No, but she didn't mean such, dear, she spoke very civil. Oh yes, dear, I've got to say she did. 'I beg your pardon,' she said, 'Have you seen anyone here?' she said. And we told her, no, we hadn't, not a soul, and she said, 'Oh, thank you,' and she sat down and we looked round a bit more and went away."

"Leaving her in the church?"

"That's right. Only she did get up when we were going out and she might have come out just after."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Did you see the red car again?"

"Well, there! It's funny your asking that. I didn't, but you believe you did, dear. I can't be sure, dear, I just think there was a car round behind the church but I didn't notice partic'lar."

"Thank you very much." Reggie rose. "You've noticed a great deal, ladies. I wish everybody was as good as you."

They smirked, they giggled at each other. They swelled importance as the deputy took their addresses. He ushered them out.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SPANNER

REGGIE WANDERED TO the window and stood looking down into the street.

Ive gave his back a satiric glance and transferred it with sharper mockery to the chief constable. "I fear we have to congratulate him, major."

Lacy sat in a heap. He drew himself up. He swallowed and said thickly: "I apologise, Fortune."

"What?" Reggie turned, his round face plaintive. "My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! No occasion."

"Indeed there is," Lacy grew louder in earnest melancholy. "I was quite wrong. I cannot excuse myself. I should have trusted your experience—your acumen. These women confirm you absolutely. It is just as you said. People did come to the church at the time of the murder, compelled the murderer to hide with his victim to complete his crime. You divined the exact truth. I never had such a striking verification of a theory."

"Oh, that!" Reggie mumbled. "Wasn't a theory. Didn't divine anything. Only believed the evidence. Obvious the murderer was disturbed. Now you have the disturbers. Unexpected, incalculable disturbance. Miss Trott and Miss Perkins, bless 'em, gate-crashed on the cunning plan of the crime. Life is like that. The common, decent folks keep breakin' in when the devil's goin' strong. However. Though consolin', not effective. Miss Perkins and Miss Trott only told us what we knew before. Haven't given us the murderer."

Ive raised his pale eyebrows. "Is it possible you are disconcerted, Fortune?"

"Wouldn't say that, no. Disappointed. Hoped for more."

Ive's sarcastic surprise betrayed some irritation. "May I submit to your judgment," his tone was acid, "the funny young lady has some bearing on the case?"

"You may. She has. Always thought she had. But on their evidence she wasn't hammerin' Mrs. Ludlow to death." Reggie's eyelids drooped. "Do you happen to see how that simplifies things?"

"You suspect her?" Lacy was startled.

"One of the factors," Reggie murmured. "Bafflin' factor."

"I gather that you have the advantage of me." Ive looked from one to the other. "Who is this flustered young lady?"

A police sergeant came in and gave Reggie a letter and he turned away to read it.

"From the description I take it she is Miss Christabel Biggs," said Lacy. "She's the daughter of a wealthy Australian widow who has bought the Whitfold estate. She is a wild, ill-bred young woman but I cannot conceive that she had any motive for murdering Mrs. Ludlow."

Reggie folded his letter and put it away.

"Well, Fortune?" Ive enquired.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Our Miss Biggs is mixed up with things. On the Knob, night of the bonfire, just before Davis was murdered. Came to the inquest on Davis. Went to the Filton show. Round about the church at the time of Mrs. Ludlow's murder. With car. Curious and interestin'." He turned again and looked out of the window.

"May one ask how you have interpreted all that?" said Ive.

"Yes. I haven't," Reggie answered.

Lacy's florid countenance struggled in thought. "Why, but the car," he exclaimed. "You told us Mrs. Ludlow was killed with a car spanner."

"That is so. And Miss Biggs has a red sports car. Same like the two kind ladies saw in the lane above the church. Yet she came into the church after them, after Mrs. Ludlow had changed the altar flowers, after the first blow had been struck when Mrs. Ludlow was down in the crypt."

"I appreciate your difficulty," Ive sneered.

"You think so?" Reggie looked round. "Still a difficult case, yes, Ive. Not at the end yet. More evidence required. Why doesn't it turn up? In spite of wireless S.O.S. for anybody who was near the church, in spite of all the efforts of the earnest Lucas, no one comes to us except the kind ladies, Miss Trott and Miss Perkins. Our Miss Biggs don't appear. Strange and painful reluctance to assist the police."

"There is indeed," said Lacy vehemently. "I don't like it, Fortune. But I can't understand what Lucas is doing."

"Doin' his best. Trust him. However. Another strikin' omission. Nothing from the Reverend Mr. Troove. He lives in sight of his church. He said he didn't go there yesterday till the evening. But he often went when Mrs. Ludlow came to change the flowers. If we knew the real reason why he couldn't have us think he met her yesterday, I——" Reggie broke off and turned again to the window—"I should say we'd be at the end of the case," he finished the sentence softly.

"Troove?" Lacy muttered.

"Yes. Recurrin' factor, the Reverend Mr. Troove. However. Others to work out. Here is Miss Biggs at last. In her red car. With her, Mr. Gower. Have 'em in, major." Reggie smiled and went out.

"Omniscience is never surprised," said Ive with a sardonic glance at the closing door as Lacy rang his bell.

"If I remember, this Gower is your local gentleman Bolshevik."

"Quite. A pestilent nuisance. Insufferable, posing cad. I'm not surprised at all," Lacy declared. "Gower is just the sort of fellow Christabel Biggs would choose to run after."

They were brought into the room, Christabel sped across it crying: "Good afternoon, Major Lacy. We simply had to come." Gower stopped by the door, arranging himself in an attitude and expression of haughty contempt.

Lacy said: "Good afternoon," ignored Christabel's outstretched hand and told them to sit down.

She dropped into Reggie's vacant chair and looked round at Gower. "Come on, big boy." He stalked forward and stood behind her. "Don't be silly," she pushed him away, "Get yourself a chair."

"I prefer to stand," Gower announced as if it were a tragic resolve.

"Infant," said she and I've laughed and she blushed.

Reggie came back. "Well, well!" his tone was mocking. He surveyed them comprehensively, Christabel in orange linen coat and skirt, trim as a sleek bird from her black curls to her toes, Gower unkempt and slovenly, flannel trousers crumpled and stained, jerkin shining iridescent with age. She was pale and Gower red, but her eyes shone. "How do you do?" Reggie murmured. "So you have come at last."

"Don't be impudent," Gower exploded. "What do you mean by that?"

"Taken a long time to make up your mind, Gower."

"Miss Biggs has just told me, she had to come," Lacy repeated the words slowly. "I was about to ask her why she did not come before."

"Yes. We have to know that. Did you hear the wireless this morning, Miss Biggs?"

"No, I didn't. I wasn't in. I——"

"One moment. And you, Gower?"

"I have no wireless apparatus. My time is valuable. The fatuities of——"

"You think so?" Reggie interrupted. "However. Somebody must have told you the police were asking for you."

Gower's voice rose. "Why the devil should you——"

"Speakin' in the interests of the lady?" Reggie drawled.

"We are not here to be bullied," Gower roared.

"Oh, be quiet," Christabel flashed at him. "You're muddling everything. Go on, Mr. Fortune. What is it?"

"Where were you all the morning?"

She spoke fast. "After breakfast I drove over to see Mr. Gower. Then he told me Inspector Lucas had been to him in the night asking what he knew about Mrs. Ludlow's death. Of course he didn't know anything, any more than I do. Afterwards a policeman came in and said there had been a broadcast asking anyone who was near the church yesterday to come here. That's how we heard of it. So then I drove over with Mr. Gower. Because I did go into the church. If you'd asked me last night I would have told you."

"Mr. Gower was asked in the night," Reggie murmured. "He didn't mention you'd been in the church between three and four. Why not?"

"I was not asked that," Gower shouted. "The fool of an inspector tried to bluster me into an admission of some knowledge of what happened to Mrs. Ludlow. I knew nothing. I know nothing. Nor does Miss Biggs. Nothing. This is all imbecility or fraud."

Reggie contemplated him with closing eyes. "Feel entitled to talk like that? Where were you when Miss Biggs was in the church?"

"Go to the devil," Gower shrugged. "I was with her."

"You silly ass!" Christabel cried. "Blast you, don't do the noble hero. That is the limit. I don't want you. Of

course you weren't with me. When did you ever go into a church? He stayed up on the hill, on the heath, Mr. Fortune."

"Is that so? Agree with the lady, Gower? Lying don't help her."

Gower tossed back his long hair. "There's no contradiction," he announced. "She was only in the church a minute. I was quite close."

Lacy leaned forward to catch Reggie's eye. "Interestin' revision, yes," Reggie murmured. "Now, Miss Biggs, what time was it when the policeman told you you were wanted here? Ten o'clock—eleven?"

She looked at her watch. "I'm not sure. By eleven I should think."

"Well, well. And it's after three now. Took you a long time to agree you'd better come. Why was that?"

She looked up at him. "I don't know. We were talking. Going over what we remembered."

"Did Mr. Gower object to coming?"

"Nonsense," she cried. "Here he is."

"Yes, I did object," Gower's voice drowned hers. "I knew it was only another police fraud. I'm only here to protect her."

"From what?" Reggie murmured.

Gower laughed. "Your foul trade. You are hired to cover up crime when a class interest is involved. You played your tricks well with poor Davis. You won't——"

"Crime?" Reggie broke in. "So you know Mrs. Ludlow was murdered?"

"Oh!" Christabel gave a little cry and shivered.

"Pah! Futile cunning," Gower sneered. "That's patent; of course she was. But you won't treat Miss Biggs as you treated Fay Carter, fox it as you please."

"I warn you," Lacy exclaimed. "Anything you say may be used in evidence."

"And everything you say. Be sure of that."

"Don't!" Christabel whispered. "Don't be silly."

"Well, well," Reggie purred. "Didn't begin by backin' the lady, Gower. However. Miss Biggs, do you care to tell us what you did yesterday afternoon?"

"Of course I will. I came to tell you," she looked up at him. "I drove over from Whitfold soon after two. I was going to the church to help Mrs. Ludlow with the flowers. I've done that several times lately."

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Ludlow liked you to help?"

"I—I hope so," Christabel's voice faltered. "I liked to. She was always sweet to me. But she wasn't like other people—I don't know how to say it—as if her real self didn't be with you. Well, coming over the hill I met Mr. Gower and I stopped and got out and talked to him."

"Had you done that several times too?"

"Quite a lot. It amused me," her eyes flashed at Gower. "We haven't a darned thing in common, we put up a jolly old hate. Then he's priceless. Oh, God! Sorry. And so this. If I'd been there!" She cried and swore.

"How long were you with Mr. Gower?" Reggie asked.

"I'm not sure. Half an hour, an hour. When I got to the church, Mrs. Ludlow had done the flowers and there wasn't anybody there but two female hikers giggling. They said they hadn't seen her."

"If somebody said you didn't go into the church till a quarter to four, would you agree?"

She winced. "It might have been as late as that," she said faintly.

"Mrs. Ludlow generally got there before three?"

"Oh!" Christabel gulped. "About three. But I was damned late."

"From about half-past two till half-past three you were with Mr. Gower on the hill?"

She nodded. "Yes, yes, I must have been. My God, is that when she was killed?"

"She was killed in the crypt after she'd done the flowers."

Gower," Reggie turned, "do you agree with Miss Biggs about the time?"

"Absolutely."

"You didn't go into the church at all?"

"I've never been inside the place."

"Why did you start by saying you went in with her, sir?" Lacy demanded in an orderly-room voice.

"I said I was with her," Gower growled. "So I was practically all the time. She drove down to the church, she was back again on the hill in a few minutes and told me Mrs. Ludlow had gone and we talked again for a while, then she went home and so did I. The next thing I heard about it was from Miss Biggs driving up to my cottage about nine o'clock. Then she told me Mrs. Ludlow was missing and dragged me out to search for her."

"You confirm that, Miss Biggs?" Reggie asked.

"Yes. The lad didn't need dragging though. He was keen. We searched all the paths she might have gone, then came back to his cottage and I rang up Tillingmere and they told me."

"And you went there. What did you do, Gower? You didn't stay at your cottage. We rang you. No answer."

"I went out again to meet Miss Biggs when she came away from Ludlow's place. I wanted to know what the devil had happened."

"You would. Yes. What happened is that Mrs. Ludlow was fatally injured with blows from a car spanner. Miss Biggs, did you know that the big spanner of your car is not in it?"

Christabel's eyes dilated. "I haven't used the tools in weeks. You mean——"

"A Puck, your car, what?" Reggie opened his case. "This is the spanner which killed Mrs. Ludlow. The big spanner of a Puck car."

Christabel stared at it, her bosom rose, her throat quivered, she put her hand before her eyes.

"So that's the trick!" Gower gave a roar of laughter. "Be damned to you, you'll not win by that, you fool. You picked the thing out of her car just now when she came here."

"Oh, no. No. Not any good, Gower. I haven't been near the car."

"What an answer!" Gower laughed. "Of course you sent one of your underlings. You only give the orders for the dirty work. Your hands are clean. I knew you wanted to bring the girl here to make some cheating evidence. I'm glad I came with her! Now I can expose you. She must come or you couldn't get her car spanner."

"Your error. I wanted her here, because she'd be safe. Sorry, Miss Biggs. You were wise to come. You've done right, Gower. Mind drawin' up your sleeves a bit?"

Gower dragged them back. "My wrists are scratched, if that's what you want to see. I scratched them last night poking into the brambles and the gorse on the hill looking for Mrs. Ludlow."

Reggie looked close at the marks.

"Yes, he did," Christabel gasped. "He did really."

"Thanks." Reggie turned away. "That'll do." He spoke into Lacy's ear.

"Quite, certainly," Lacy nodded and rang his bell and cleared his throat. "Miss Biggs, I must ask you to stay here while further enquiries are made. Gower, I have to tell you, you will be detained until your statement has been investigated."

Gower began to abuse him. "Don't, don't!" Christabel cried.

"You——" Gower swung upon her.

"Not nice, no." Reggie came between them and Gower was shouldered out by a pair of policemen.

"Oh, silly!" she called after him and rose unsteadily. Reggie made to help her but she shrank away. "I'm

sorry. Anything occur to you about the spanner? When could it have been taken from your car?"

"I don't know," she muttered. "I often leave the car. It might have been taken ages ago. I told you. I haven't used the tools for weeks."

"When did you speak to Mrs. Ludlow last?"

She started, she frowned at him. "Why?"

"Why don't you want to tell me?"

"It isn't like that. You jump about so. I don't mind telling you. I met her at dinner on Monday at Mrs. Carson's."

"Oh. With Ludlow?"

She nodded.

"Was Mrs. Ludlow quite friendly with you?"

"Yes. I mean just the same. She's always been shy and reserved. I told you before."

"Nothing unusual at the dinner?" Reggie asked slowly.

"Nothing, no." Her eyes met his in defiance.

One of the policemen came back. "Please," said Reggie.

"Oh, very well. Where am I to go?"

"This way, miss," the policeman answered, and she ran out.

CHAPTER XXXII

SMOKE RINGS

"WELL, WELL," REGGIE sat down and filled his pipe. "She did notice something at that dinner."

"I can't understand the girl," Lacy said angrily.

Ive pursed his lips. "I am of your opinion, Fortune. The young woman was lying. Though more skilfully than the man."

"You think so?" Reggie lit the pipe. "They will do it. The best and the worst. Will try to protect somebody."


"That would be thoroughly feminine," Ive sneered. "But I did not observe that Miss Biggs protected anyone but herself. The sham of chivalry came from the man. Which was quite masculine."

"Oh, no," said Reggie through smoke. "All the same. There's only one sex. For general purposes."

"I—really, I don't follow," Lacy gasped.

"We are not meant to," Ive told him acidly. "This is Fortune's blague for a case in which he is at a loss."

"My poor Ive!" Reggie purred. "Think again. Think."

"I am waiting for some evidence worth thought," Ive answered. "You appear to have established that Mrs. Ludlow was murdered with the spanner from this young woman's car, that she has an affair with this insufferable youth, that both of them are frightened and think it necessary to lie about their actions. But they combine to give one another an alibi which, as to the girl, is confirmed by independent witnesses. You have brought out no motive for either of them to murder Mrs. Ludlow." 

"Surely, surely," Lacy made haste to object, "there is no satisfactory alibi. The girl's is not confirmed, we only have that she was not in the church at three-fifteen, while Mrs. Ludlow had been stunned and taken into the crypt before that. Both the girl and Gower may have been in the church when Mrs. Ludlow arrived. The only evidence that they were not is their own."

"As you say," Reggie blew a smoke ring. "Well, I've?"

"The theory is that the two went into the church for some private or improper purpose?" I've asked. "Mrs. Ludlow disturbed them, they, or one of them, felt it necessary that she should not live to tell what she saw or heard. She was stunned and Gower removed her to the crypt and killed her. The girl Biggs went out to keep watch and when she saw visitors approach the church returned to ensure that Gower was not discovered. Do you propose to proceed on those lines, Fortune?"

"Must work 'em out, yes. Our job."

"Quite so," Lacy approved. "Everything before me points to Gower and the young woman. The weapon, their presence at the time, their embarrassment and prevarication. I don't feel your difficulty about motive, I've. It seems most natural to me that a lady like Mrs. Ludlow should be distressed and angry at an intrigue between Gower and Miss Biggs. If she discovered them in some compromising situation—it may not have been in the church, it may have been on the heath—she would certainly feel it her duty to do something. And Gower—a violent, unprincipled rascal like Gower—in passion, frustrated passion, the most brutal action may be expected from him."

"Fierce animal, yes," Reggie sighed. "We must take up Gower."

"I am not to deny that," said I've. "I find your elaboration of Fortune an improvement, major. Let us take it

these bright young people were on the heath when Mrs. Ludlow disturbed their amours. Gower followed her to the church in a mad rage and killed her. For such a crime there are many precedents. What I have to point out is the absence of anything in the nature of proof. Anyone at any time may have stolen the car spanner. You have no evidence but the embarrassment of the girl and the youth that their affair had gone beyond propriety."

"What I can't understand is the girl involving herself with such a creature as Gower," Lacy complained.

Ive smiled. "It is their nature. They love a beast."

"You're so sweepin', Ive," said Reggie. "Big, broad general statements. Stand no nonsense from facts. Just ignore 'em. We have some proof who the murderer was—or wasn't. I told you so. Said it very loud and clear. Blood on the coffin plank, on the vestment chest, on the stole. If all that didn't come from Mrs. Ludlow's wounds it came from the murderer. My young doctor's made his report on it. Brought to me just before we dealt with Miss Biggs and Gower." He took the letter out of his pocket. "Here you are. It isn't Mrs. Ludlow's blood. Hers was Group II. And the blood on the plank and the chest is Group I. Traces of Group I on the stole, mostly Group II. You see? Murderer scratched hand or wrist on the coffin plank, left blood there and on the vestment chest when opening it. Bein' splashed with Mrs. Ludlow's blood, cleaned that up on the stole, sheddin' a trifle from self. Well. Murderer therefore is Group I. But Miss Biggs is Group II. So she didn't do the killin'."

"Thank God!" Lacy cried.

"Yes. We are given chances," Reggie said gravely.

"You are obscure, Fortune," Ive's tone was sarcastic. "How were you given the chance to test the blood of Miss Biggs?"

"Last night, Kind people came enquirin' after Mrs.

Ludlow. Asked 'em all to offer for transfusion of blood to her in case we could save her. All willin'. Ludlow himself, Miss Biggs, Mrs. Carson, Troove."

"Most ingenious," Ive sneered. "Your resources are amazing. Did providence also give you the chance to obtain a sample of Gower's blood?"

"Yes. Via Lucas. Gower didn't come to make kind enquiries. He told you, Lucas knocked him up in the small hours. He got rough with Lucas. You saw the scratches on his wrists. In the scrap they bled on Lucas's hands. Lucas wiped off the blood and sent it on to me and my young doctor."

Ive gave a titter of a laugh. "Providential indeed. First the appeal to humanity, then violence,—if by any means you can get evidence."

"Why are you, Ive?" Reggie drawled. "Appeal to give blood to the woman who bled to death—yes, I made it and no one's the worse who hadn't killed her. Violence—not by me nor by Lucas. Gower ran amuck at bein' asked what he'd been up to. Neither I nor Lucas knew he had wounds that would bleed."

"I consider you have been perfectly right, Fortune," Lacy announced, "Perfectly correct throughout."

"My dear major," Reggie gave a twisted smile. "Thanks very much. Well, Gower's blood is Group I. Same like the murderer's."

"I always thought so." Lacy flung himself back. "The scoundrel! That wretched girl, what are we to make of her?"

"You leap to conclusions, major," Ive laughed. "I conceive even Fortune will hardly tell you that a jury would convict Gower on this blood test. It is quite futile as evidence. What is the proportion of the population with blood of Group I, Fortune?"

"Over forty per cent. About as many as Group II."

"I am grateful for your candour. You see, major, he

has no evidence of identity, no proof that the murderer was Gower, for all his amazing ingenuity."

"Can't bear facts, can you, Ive?" said Reggie.

"Why, sir, have you any doubt that Gower did the murder?" said Lacy.

Ive compressed his lips. "If you ask my opinion, I reply that in all probability he did. If you ask what chance you have of convicting him, I must tell you, practically none. Fortune's evidence merely proves that some one of millions of people murdered the woman."

"Oh no. You won't think," Reggie answered. "Also proves quite a lot of people didn't. Among other things. Miss Biggs didn't, she's Group II. Ludlow didn't—"

"Good heavens, of course not," Lacy was horrified.

"No, he's Group IV. Troove didn't. He's Group III. But the other kind person who offered blood for Mrs. Ludlow, Mrs. Carson, she's Group I, same like Gower. Odd, isn't it? Don't know which would hate most to be thought same class as the other. However. In terms of blood they are. Same big Group I."

"Mrs. Carson?" Lacy repeated. "Why, that's amazing, that's meaningless."

"Entirely," Ive smiled. "You have reached the inevitable conclusion. By Fortune's blood test you may charge two people out of every five. What is its force against Gower?"

"I wonder." Reggie's eyelids drooped, he blew one smoke ring through another. "The final problem. Very interestin' problem. Shouldn't say you know the answer, Ive. You don't. However. We have chances of getting it. Any objection to takin' 'em?"

"I can accept no responsibility for your methods," Ive answered, biting the words.

"My poor chap! Answer of the officials on the Day of Judgment. We are not responsible, all one body, we."

"What do you suggest, Fortune?" Lacy asked nervously.

"Just further enquiries," Reggie murmured. "Remember I said, if we knew the real reason Troove took pains to make out he wasn't at the church with Mrs. Ludlow, we might be at the end. He has been goin' often on her afternoons with the flowers. Why should he cut out yesterday? Lucas was takin' that up. And no report from Lucas. Now let's see what we can do with Mr. Troove."

"Certainly, that's thoroughly justified," said Lacy. "I can't understand Lucas though. It's most irregular not to keep in touch with me. I don't know what he's doing."

"Oh yes, quite clear, major," Reggie soothed him. "Still workin' people for anybody who saw anybody by the church and what everybody was up to at the time. And how. Long job. Dull, discouragin' job. Good man, your Lucas. He'll go through with it. However. Another chance. Remember our Miss Biggs on the last time she spoke to Mrs. Ludlow—at dinner on Monday at Mrs. Carson's, with the Ludlows. Something happened there. Something Miss Biggs wouldn't tell us. Mrs. Carson might know. Ludlow might know. Want to ask 'em." He reached for the telephone. "You don't mind?"

He had got Mrs. Carson's number before Lacy decided to approve. "No, that is quite a reasonable course, quite a proper enquiry."

"Police headquarters speaking," Reggie told the telephone. "Want Mrs. Carson, please . . . Speakin' for the chief constable, Mrs. Carson. He is just going to Mr. Ludlow's house. He would like you to meet him there . . . Yes, it is about Mrs. Ludlow . . . Yes, at once, please . . . Thank you. Good-bye." He stood up. "Want 'em both, don't you, major? Better see 'em together. One memory might help the other. And we can take Troove on the way. My car's here."

"I—I have my own," Lacy gasped.

"All right. Come on then," Reggie departed.

"Really, he is very hasty," Lacy complained to Ive. "He gives one no time to consider."

"Don't you perceive that was his intention?" Ive sneered. "You may take it you are not now in control, major. Fortune's practice is to drive dangerously when a case is not going well. I can accept no responsibility."

Lacy started to his feet and hustled out.

CHAPTER XXXIII

OBDURACY OF THE RECTOR

THE CHIEF CONSTABLE reinforced his chauffeur with another policeman and a sergeant and then demanded speed.

They blared their way through Merchester, bullying everything aside and ignoring traffic lights. Thus they gained enough on Reggie to come in sight of his car in the outskirts of the town. But thereafter he swerved round a double bank of bus and lorries to take a moment's closing gap on the wrong side and vanished.

"Coo!" The chauffeur spoke with closed lips to the policeman beside him. "I wouldn't half like to have the fines that bloke earns."

They did not see him again till they swung round Hurst church into the rectory lane. He had turned his car and was getting out, he put up his hand to stop them.

"I say, major!" he smiled as the chief constable's red face came alongside and emerged to confront him. "You do go it. Drivin' very dangerous."

Lacy made a choking noise and spluttered. "Let me have no levity, Fortune."

"My dear chap!" Reggie took his arm and led him on into the rector's grounds. "Did you happen to think I was becomin' a danger? Very nervous, our legal Ive."

Lacy glowered at him. "I must have you understand that I am in control, I shall take charge of these enquiries."

"You are, you will," said Reggie cheerfully.

Quick marching they passed along a moss-grown path, which had been a carriage drive before the rhododendrons

on either side encroached upon it. It twisted round to a lawn on which the grass did not grow, so dense was the shadow of exotic pines and cedars crowding upon the drab contortions of the rectory, a big lump of the day-before-yesterday's Gothic, its narrow, pointed windows bare of curtains or any sign of habitation.

"'Childe Roland to the dark tower came,'" said Reggie and tugged at the sham antique bell-pull which hung rusty beside the iron-studded door. A distant clang replied, but they waited long and Lacy had rung again and again before the door creaked open a foot and a grim old woman looked round it.

"You have no call to ring like that," she told them. "I was coming. The rector can't see anyone."

"Tell Mr. Troove that the chief constable wants him at once," said Lacy and pushed the door back and strode into the dingy, empty hall.

"I won't do no such thing," she stood in his way.

"Troove," Lacy shouted. "Troove! Am I to search the house for you?"

"Imperence!" the old woman gasped.

There was a sound of movement and the lean, bent figure of Troove came out of a room. "What is this?" he said angrily. "Major Lacy? You amaze me, sir. You have no right to intrude upon me so. It is lawless and offensive."

"Don't take that tone with me, Troove. You should know your duty. Have you instructed your servant to obstruct the police?"

"My servant did perfectly right, sir. I gave orders that no one was to be admitted. That will do, Martha. Let me tell you, Major Lacy, I have higher duties than to be at your disposal."

"Am I to take you to the police station or will you answer my questions here?"

"I shall make no resistance, whatever you do. As you have broken into my house, you may ask me what you

choose. Whether I answer will depend upon your questions. I have already received an officer of yours and told him all that I could."

"Lucas has been here, has he?" Lacy glowered. "Then you understand that we are investigating a murder. Mrs. Ludlow was brutally murdered. Don't you recognise it's your duty to assist in doing justice?"

"The question is insolent, sir."

"Oh, I say," Reggie broke in. "Wastin' time. Why so cross? Quite a simple point for you, Mr. Troove. You said you weren't at the church all yesterday afternoon. Did you often go when Mrs. Ludlow was there to change the flowers?"

Troove took a moment to consider before he answered. "I am in the church on many afternoons."

"Pity you didn't go yesterday, wasn't it?"

Troove drew in his breath. "I regret that deeply."

"You should, yes," Reggie said softly. "Why didn't you go?"

Troove's face was pallid and stern. He met Reggie's eyes without flinching. "I did not," he answered. "I was in my room here in meditation."

"The question was, why?" Reggie's tone sharpened. "Think, Troove. The murderer didn't want you to be in the church with Mrs. Ludlow. You'd have been in the way. Mrs. Ludlow would have been alive now. Why didn't you go?"

"I can give you no reason," said Troove.

"Oh. If you did, it might show who the murderer was. You see that?"

"I do not. I know nothing of the murderer."

"Have you had any letter about yourself and Mrs. Ludlow lately?"

"That is an infamous question!" Troove cried.

"No. There have been anonymous letters. You didn't know of 'em?"

"I did not," Troove flushed. "The parish is debauched with vicious minds."

"Did anyone suggest to you you'd better not be in the church when Mrs. Ludlow came?"

Troove stood silent.

"Answer the question, sir!" Lacy exclaimed.

"My answer is that no one controls my actions," said Troove. "Nothing has been said to me by any person which could help you to discover the murderer. I have no more to say."

"As clever as that?" Reggie smiled awry. "Well, well. Come on, major."

"I warn you, Troove," Lacy shook a menacing hand at him, "I have not done with you. You will hear more of this."

"Oh yes. Yes. He will. Come on now," Reggie hurried out.

Lacy caught him up before he reached the gate to growl: "Infernal, obdurate fellow."

"As you say. Obduracy very marked."

"Damning, wasn't it? He'll suffer for it."

"He is sufferin' now."

"No doubt he is. He must know his silence is most suspicious. He won't speak because he daren't. But we are no nearer the truth, confound him!"

"I wouldn't say that," Reggie murmured.

"What? You told me if we could get the real reason why he didn't go to the church we should have the murderer in our hands. We haven't got it."

"Not stated, no. However. Instructive conversation. Try another."

They came to the gate and the cars.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CONVERSATION PIECE

A POLICEMAN WITH A bicycle stood talking to the sergeant in the chief constable's car.

"What are you doing here?" Lacy demanded.

"Beg pardon, sir. I've just been over to headquarters taking a shirt with what looks like blood on the wristbands I found in Mr. Gower's cottage and a message from Inspector Lucas nothing else found there."

"Where the devil is Lucas?"

"I couldn't say, sir. When I came back to the station at Hurst, I was given instructions to work over all the lanes and paths round the church and look for anything unusual about, marks on the ground or the ground disturbed. Which I was doing."

"Thorough fellow, Lucas. Very thorough," Reggie got into his car. "Come on, major. Safety first with me."

The car began to move and Lacy scrambled in, waving his own to follow. Then he objected: "I should have thought, Fortune, I should have thought you had better test the blood on this shirt."

"No hurry. That's only blood from Gower's own scratched wrists. Which we had before. Want clothes with something more than that. The murderer was splashed with Mrs. Ludlow's blood. Those are the clothes Lucas is after. Very sound, the man Lucas."

Lacy made an exclamation of contempt. "Do you suppose the clothes are buried in the lanes? The murderer came out and stripped himself and went home naked? It's preposterous."

"You're so violent. Not stripped, no. Might have shed an outer garment or so and stowed it in a rabbit hole, fox earth or what not. Thus evadin' notice. Might have slunk home and abolished the bloody clothes subsequent. Lots of possibilities. Clever animal, this murderer. Though hot and bothered. Must take pains, major."

As a straight and steep ascent opened before them, he sent the car on at a speed which made Lacy grip the arm of his seat.

Reggie lay back and looked up at the sky and whistled solemn music out of Beethoven as they swept over the crest of the slope and plunged into the depths of a switch-back. "'Triumphing over Death and Chance and thee, Oh Time,'" he murmured.

"What? What?" Lacy gasped.

"Not us. No. The lady," Reggie explained. "A dear lady. So they say. God rest her! And we—well!" He slowed to the top of the second hill and swung into the park of Tillingmere Manor.

Fallow deer fled from the car, it turned from the gleam of the lake and the great brown house came into sight.

As they drew up at the portico, the door was opened. The butler, red-eyed and yellow of face, blinked at Reggie and Lacy and wrung shaking hands. "If you please, major, if you please, sir," he moved unsteadily away and opened the door of a drawing room. "I will tell Mr. Ludlow. He said to let him know at once when you came."

"Is Mrs. Carson here?" Reggie asked.

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Carson is with the master, thank you, sir."

When he came back again, he was still alone. "Mr. Ludlow is in the study, sir. It is this way."

As he opened the study door for them, they heard voices fall to silence.

In front of the plants which hid the fireplace Ludlow stood, stiffly erect, watching the door. Mrs. Carson sat

facing him but she had turned to stare at it over her shoulder. Neither he nor she moved for a moment, their intent gaze did not falter, they gave no sign of recognition or surprise. Ludlow's strong, aquiline face was still as marble. The deep-set eyes seemed all black. Mrs. Carson's full cheeks had a high colour, her lips were parted, her brown eyes wide and bright.

"I am very sorry to trouble you, Ludlow," Lacy said nervously, "And you, Mrs. Carson."

At the sound of his voice, Ludlow moved and before he had finished was answering: "Don't talk of trouble now."

"No, indeed," Mrs. Carson cried. "But, major, you might have told Mr. Ludlow you wanted me to come here. He was so surprised and I couldn't tell him why."

"Sorry about that," said Reggie. "All my fault. We were rather in a hurry."

"Why, what can I do? Do tell me," she asked eagerly.

"Sit down, won't you?" said Ludlow. "Have a drink?" He went to a side table where a decanter and syphon stood.

"No, thank you," Lacy took one of the easy chairs by the hearth and Reggie the other.

Ludlow came back to his own half-empty glass on the mantelpiece and finished it and turned to Lacy. "Well, major?"

"Yes, do tell us, what can we do?" Mrs. Carson cried, she opened the coat from her bosom, she leaned forward, her gloved hands clasped on her knee, looking eagerly from Lacy to Reggie.

Lacy cleared his throat. "I have to tell you, Ludlow, there is no doubt your wife was murdered."

"My God!" Ludlow groaned. "I know that, man. I saw her in the coffin."

"Oh, don't!" Mrs. Carson shrank back. "Don't. You told me——" she sobbed and hid her eyes.

"Just puttin' the case," said Reggie.

"Have you found out who killed her?" Ludlow asked fiercely.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured.

Ludlow took a step forward and glowered down at him.

"No, I am unable to say so at present, Ludlow," Lacy announced. "The position is this. I have grounds for suspicion. I require further information."

"There are points, yes," Reggie made himself comfortable. "About Mr. Troove. He says he wasn't at the church all yesterday afternoon. But there is reason to believe he often was there when Mrs. Ludlow was. Do you know anything about that?" He looked plaintively from Ludlow to Mrs. Carson.

"The rector?" Mrs. Carson spoke in a hushed shocked tone. "Oh no, he's a hermit."

"About what?" Ludlow's voice drowned hers. "Troove spends most of his time in his church. The man's a devotee. If you've been told any scandal about my wife and him, it's a lie."

"I am quite sure it is, Ludlow," said Lacy earnestly.

"Oh yes. Yes. So am I," Reggie agreed. "But the police have had anonymous letters. Have you—either of you?"

"No, indeed!" Mrs. Carson cried. "How vile!"

"There was a letter sent me," Ludlow answered, "two letters, a little while ago, paltry, stupid scrawls. I put them on the fire."

"That Troove was meeting your wife?"

"Something of the sort," Ludlow frowned. "I don't remember the words. Half-witted spite."

"You didn't tell your wife?"

"No, of course I didn't. What do you mean? I'll not have you insult her."

"You will not," said Reggie slowly. "She—suffered. That's what brought us here, Ludlow. You must want

justice on the brute who killed her. Help us. Well. Troove says he didn't meet her at the church yesterday, though he often did. He won't tell us why he didn't go. Mrs. Carson—you live just above the rectory. Did you happen to see Troove goin' to the church or near it?"

"No, but I shouldn't. I was lying down in the garden, in a hammock under the limes. I couldn't see the church or the rectory from there."

"Pity. However. Troove may be tellin' the truth, though not the whole truth. If somebody sent him a scandalous letter too—that might have kept him from meetin' Mrs. Ludlow. He said he didn't know of any anonymous letters. But if somebody told him there was scandal about, that would be enough to make him stop at home. And leave her alone for the murderer."

Mrs. Carson shuddered. "How horrible! Yes, but of course it would, he couldn't bear to be talked about with a woman. And with Ann! Then that's why he won't tell you, he can't endure any suspicion of him and her."

"You think so?" Reggie murmured. "That sort of man. Yes, you may be right. Very clever, if it was worked so."

Ludlow took a step nearer and his hands clenched. "Why don't you make the fellow speak out?"

"I assure you I have tried already," said Lacy. "I shall press him further."

"Not so easy, makin' people speak." Reggie looked up at Ludlow's grim rage with dreamy eyes. "Anything occur to you?"

"Don't you see?" Ludlow spoke furiously. "If anyone told the fellow a tale to keep him away from my wife, it was the scoundrel who killed her."

"Could be," Reggie murmured. "I wonder. We've put that to Troove already. Didn't work. However. Try another way. Ludlow, you and your wife dined with Mrs. Carson on Monday. Miss Christabel Biggs was also there. Remember anything particular about that dinner?"

Mrs. Carson started and gave a faint scream of surprise. "Oh! Oh, but I don't understand!" She looked to Ludlow, anxious and distressed. "Can you?"

The frown, the lines of rage in Ludlow's pallor were smoothed away. "What has Miss Biggs to do with it?" His voice was quiet. "Why do you bring her name in?"

"I didn't. I found it there," said Reggie. "Miss Biggs was seen at the church yesterday."

"Christabel!" Mrs. Carson cried. "When? Who saw her?"

"Two witnesses. About the time Mrs. Ludlow was bein' killed."

"Then she—no, that's impossible," Mrs. Carson gasped. Her cheeks lost their colour. She gazed at Ludlow, horror and dread in her wide eyes. But she won no attention from Ludlow's frozen calm. He said nothing.

"Oh yes. Miss Biggs did go to the church," Reggie smiled. "She said so herself."

"She said——" Mrs. Carson repeated. "Was she alone then?"

"I told you, two witnesses."

"Who were they?" Ludlow asked.

"Miss Trott and Miss Perkins. You wouldn't know 'em. Very good witnesses though."

"But did they just see her?" Mrs. Carson was breathless. "No one with her? Did they see Mrs. Ludlow in the church? And Christabel—did she see Mrs. Ludlow—did she say?"

"Very interestin' questions," Reggie murmured. "The time is interestin' too. It was a little after three Miss Perkins and Miss Trott came to the church. Unexpected. Just after the time Mrs. Ludlow was struck first."

"Then—then—they saw Christabel——?" Mrs. Carson's voice died away.

"Saw Miss Biggs attack my wife?" Ludlow finished the question in a tone of cold contempt, staring down upon

Reggie. "Good witnesses!" he sneered. "Who are they? Who put that into their mouths?"

"You don't believe it?" Reggie's eyes searched into his.

"No, no," Lacy asserted his importance as a chief constable. "this won't do at all. This is a confusion of the facts. I——"

Reggie sighed and lay back.

"I must tell you, Ludlow," Lacy went on, "these two ladies are quite trustworthy. Nothing has been suggested to them. Their statement is they entered the church about a quarter-past three and found no one there, but the flowers on the altar were fresh. Observe the significance. At that time Mrs. Ludlow had changed the flowers, she had been attacked and taken unconscious to the crypt. Shortly afterwards Miss Biggs came into the church and asked these ladies had they seen anyone. Then they went away and left her there."

Ludlow burst out in angry laughter. "So your good witnesses actually prove that Miss Biggs could have had nothing to do with my wife's death." He turned on Reggie. "You were playing a trick on me. I am obliged to you. It was kind."

"Oh no. Just puttin' the case," Reggie murmured and glanced at Lacy. "Major, would you say Miss Biggs was cleared?"

"I am not in a position to say that," Lacy announced. "There are other circumstances, Ludlow."

"Yes, quite a lot, yes," Reggie went on in a hurry. "Gettin' 'em muddled, Ludlow. Come back to the dinner at Mrs. Carson's. I was askin'—did you remember anything about it and you put me off. Try again. Party of four. Mrs. Carson, you, your wife and Miss Biggs. Miss Biggs says it was the last time she met your wife. Well? How did the party go?"

"Like any other small party of people who are intimate." Ludlow spoke with care. "There is nothing to remember.

It was a quiet, pleasant evening and very short. My wife never cared to be late. I am sure Miss Biggs is right. She never saw my wife again."

"What can you tell us, Mrs. Carson?" Reggie turned to her.

"I don't know," she hesitated, looked anxiously at Ludlow, looked down. "Of course I can't possibly say if it was the last time Christabel saw Ann."

"You mean they might have met after, anywhere, anywhen. Yes. It could be. Miss Biggs is often about this side of the hills in her car, what?"

"Her car!" Mrs. Carson repeated in a whisper and looked at Ludlow again, troubled and sorrowful. There was no response in his stern, steady gaze at her. One gloved hand made a gesture to him and fell. "I'm sorry," she said faintly and turned to Reggie. "I suppose Christabel does drive a great deal by herself. Why?"

"Car suggest anything to you?" Reggie asked.

"Oh!" she shuddered. "You mean Ann was killed with some tool from a car?"

"I didn't say so. What makes you think so?"

"Why, why," she stammered, "It would be just like what happened to me. When I was nearly killed in the church, you remember, Mr. Fortune, Dr. Ranford said it was with a car spanner."

"Oh yes, I see." Reggie smiled awry. "Did you know that, Ludlow?"

"I never heard anything about a spanner," said Ludlow cold and impassive, but he moved away and poured himself another drink.

"Well, well," Reggie gazed at his back. "Gettin' away from the dinner again. Curious you won't keep to it." Reggie turned with plaintive reproach to the chief constable.

"I am sorry, Ludlow, I must press this," Lacy spoke loudly, but Ludlow did not turn. "Miss Biggs has made a

statement to the effect that Mrs. Ludlow was quite friendly to her at the dinner. But I am not satisfied."

"Ah!" Mrs. Carson gave a little cry of distress.

Ludlow stalked back to the mantelpiece with his glass, sipped and put it down. "My wife was everyone's friend," he said quietly, "She was fond of Miss Biggs."

"Miss Biggs told us your wife was shy and reserved with her," Reggie murmured. "At that dinner."

"Just so," Lacy frowned. "Pray be frank with me, Ludlow."

"I have been. I told you the party was quiet, pleasant and short. That is all I can tell you."

"And you, Mrs. Carson," Reggie turned to her. "Did you notice anything out of the way?"

She looked up to Ludlow piteously. A tremor shook the hard lines of his mouth and jaw, the blackness of his shadowed eyes gleamed. He stared beyond her as if at something far away.

"Well?" Reggie asked.

Mrs. Carson started. "Oh, it's so difficult," she fumbled in her bag, found a handkerchief and put it to her lips.

"While you were at table—anything said, any silence showin' a strain between Miss Biggs and Mrs. Ludlow?"

"Ann never talked much, except when one was alone with her."

"And was anyone alone with her after you left the table?"

"I was."

"Oh, Miss Biggs bein' left alone with Mr. Ludlow?"

"Not left," Mrs. Carson was quick to answer. "You see it was a very hot night, we went into the garden after dinner. We sat down under the pergola above the Italian garden. But Christabel never can bear to sit still, she wandered about and when Mr. Ludlow came out she made him go for a walk with her."

Ludlow gave a queer cackle of laughter. "That's not

true. Note that, Lacy. I asked Miss Biggs to help me finish my cigar. We strolled to and fro, never out of sight of my wife sitting with—with Mrs. Carson.” He drank again. “Go on,” he said sharply.

“Yes, indeed, Christabel never took you out of sight of Ann,” Mrs. Carson answered. “Not for a moment. But poor Ann—” she held out her gloved hands to Ludlow—“Oh, how I hate this!”

“I believe you!” Ludlow’s voice went high. “Go on, go on.” He laughed again.

“You know I must,” her hands fell. “What do you suppose Ann felt? She said to me: ‘That girl. It is always like this now. She hunts David.’”

Ludlow drained his glass and let it fall in the hearth. On the crash he took a stride forward. “Lacy! You knew my wife a little,” he said thickly, “D’ye hear her talking like this—this woman?”

“Ah, don’t!” Mrs. Carson gasped. “What’s the use? You know Ann couldn’t bear it. She ran after you, poor thing, she called to you and made you come and sit with us and then—then she wouldn’t speak to Christabel. She couldn’t, I think. Oh, you know she was afraid of Christabel, afraid! And now—it’s too horrible!” She hid her face.

“You——” Ludlow roared vile names for her, caught up the paper-knife on his desk and slashed her face with the edge again and again.

She screamed, shrank down, slid to the floor as Reggie sprang at Ludlow and bore him back. Lacy came to help. For a moment or two he struggled in frantic strength dragging both men about the room, then on a sudden was limp and hung heavy upon their grasp. “That will do,” he muttered. His breath came in choked gulps. “It is finished.”

They let him fall into a chair and he dropped back and lay, jerking body and limbs, as he struggled for breath through spasms of laughter.

"This is madness," Lacy exclaimed. "I warn you, Ludlow, anything you say may be used in evidence."

"Good luck to you," Ludlow spoke like a drunken man. "That—that woman there—she killed my wife. Get that, won't you? Get it! Because she wanted me herself, the—— She killed my wife. All lies about Miss Biggs. My wife loved the child. That she-goat Carson, she was trying to buy me and murdered Ann to get me, damn her! You've heard her bluffing—I'm not for sale—I've called her—to make me say little Biggs did it—see her in hell——" the muddled sentences came fast, his voice squeaked and boomed like a boy's voice breaking, it failed in a hoarse cough, his chest heaved in a labour for breath. He raised himself, shaking, his face contorted in the rigor of a wide grin, and stared at Mrs. Carson.

She was still huddled on the ground, dabbing at her face, moaning. "Help me, please help me," she whimpered. Lacy lifted her to her chair. "Thank you, major." She clung to his hand. "Oh, how wicked!" She looked up at him, tears flowing. Across her red cheeks weals rose livid, blood flowed from cuts in her full lips.

"Allow me, ma'am." Lacy gave her his handkerchief.

"Thank you, thank you so much," she pressed it to her lips. "Ah, I can't bear it any more! He is too brutal." A roar of laughter came from Ludlow. "I tried to save you," she sobbed. "You know I did. Oh, I've done too much, Major Lacy—you see, you see, it's true what I said. It's all true and more. I didn't want to tell you about him. But now I must. He's so cruel. He did that to me, he said those vile things because it is the truth about Christabel and him, because he saw I was going to tell you everything. I couldn't bear any more. It isn't only poor Ann. It was Mr. Carter too and before——"

Ludlow laughed again and Reggie, watching him, rang the bell.

"Be silent, sir," Lacy cried, but did not stop the shrill laughter.

Through that chorus she went on fast: "Carter came to me and said he must have money or something dreadful would happen to Mr. Ludlow about Davis's death. I couldn't believe it, I told him to go away. Then I told Mr. Ludlow and he laughed and said Carter was always after money. But then at Filton, at the show, I saw Carter with Mr. Ludlow, they were quarrelling, and afterwards I dined in Filton, you see, I was there late, I saw Mr. Ludlow's car, I saw him walking by the Crown Inn. I——"

The butler opened the door. "Jug of hot water and some salt," said Reggie. "Quick."

Ludlow dragged himself to his feet, staggered forward and stood swaying over the woman, and though Lacy held him off she shrank and cowered.

Reggie put an arm round Ludlow's reeling bulk. "No. Done quite enough."

"Damn you, sir!" Ludlow's head lolled and jerked and fell back on Reggie's shoulder and grinned up at him. Through parted teeth came a gasp. "Great game, eh? I'd have won it, I'd have won—if that she-goat——" The jaw dropped, he writhed and fell forward, all his body lax in Reggie's grasp.

Reggie laid it down on the floor and knelt beside it. . . .

"My God, Fortune!" Lacy came to him. "What is this? A stroke?"

"Death." Reggie stood up. "I should say from cocaine. Large dose. Taken in his drinks. Probably some before we came. Then a final big go. After which rapid results. Get in fifteen grains or so and cocaine is quick."

"You see, you see," Mrs. Carson cried. "He knew I should tell you the truth. He daren't face it. He had to kill himself."

"He did, yes." Reggie contemplated her with closing eyes.

The butler bustled in with a tray and saw Ludlow's body and cried out: "Oh, sir, is the master ill?"

"Worse than that," Reggie said gently. "He's gone. Couldn't save him."

The butler let his tray fall. "I—I beg pardon, sir," he stammered and began to cry. "It's so hard. It's the mistress dying so dreadful. He couldn't bear it. I saw it in his face. He wouldn't ever wish to live without her. Excuse me, sir," he bent to the tray.

"My dear chap," Reggie sighed. "Sorry. Never mind that. Just go and fetch Major Lacy's men." But the butler had to clear up all the mess before he went.

Reggie turned to Lacy with a twist of a smile. "Well, well. That's how it hits a good fellow who knew Ludlow better than we do. Great spirit, Ludlow. Queer world. However. Come on, major," he bustled Lacy out.

CHAPTER XXXV

FOUR QUESTIONS

Mrs. CARSON LOOKED at the shut door, stood up and came faltering to Ludlow's body, looked down to the dilated eyes, to the set, fierce grin. "Why, why?" she whimpered. "You made me. You know you did. Oh, you were cruel to me. David!" She shrank from the mockery of the dead face and sobbed.

In a little while she controlled that, she looked at herself in the mirror of her bag, with shaking hands she made up the weals on her cheeks and her split lips.

The door opened. "Mrs. Carson, I want you to come with me, please," said Lacy's sergeant.

"Why, what is it?"

"The chief constable's instructions. This way, if you please," he shepherded her out along the hall.

"Where is Major Lacy?"

"At headquarters."

"What?" She stopped short. "He has gone away? Oh, I can't go there. I must go home. I feel so ill."

"That's all right, Mrs. Carson, I've got a car for you," the sergeant put his arm in hers and drew her on.

"But I can't, I'm almost fainting. It's been such a frightful shock. Major Lacy couldn't mean——"

"The Chief wants to see you immediate. Come along, please." He took her to the car and drove off with her . . .

She was brought into the chief constable's room. She swept upon him, crying: "What do you mean by it? How could you tell your people to bring me here? I—I—after that awful, awful shock—I could hardly move from the

house—everything's like a horrible dream," she swayed and caught at his table.

"Give Mrs. Carson a chair, sergeant," said Lacy and nodded him out.

She sank into the chair, she looked after the departing sergeant till he shut the door, she turned and saw Reggie come towards her. "Feel faint, Mrs. Carson?" he asked.

Her bosom heaved. "Yes, indeed I do."

"Let me take your pulse."

As he put his hand to her gloved wrist she drew it away. "No, no, don't fuss with me. What is it, major, tell me, I can't bear any more."

"I have to ask you four questions, Mrs. Carson," Lacy was slow and solemn. "I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence." He pointed to a man who sat at a little table by the wall.

Her eyes opened wide but showed no fear. "About David Ludlow? Oh, very well, yes. But I have told you everything."

"About Ludlow and Mrs. Ludlow," Lacy went on. "First, at this dinner of yours, when you were in the garden, when Miss Biggs was walking with Ludlow and you sat with Mrs. Ludlow, did you tell her there was nasty gossip about her and Troove?"

"Of course I didn't. I never heard of it. But if I had—how can you, Major Lacy? Of all the impossible things!"

"I shall not argue," Lacy told her. "Listen to the next question. When you were lying down yesterday afternoon, you said you were in a hammock under your limes, what——"

"Yes, yes, I was," she broke in.

"What clothes were you wearing then?" Lacy finished his sentence loudly.

After a moment she started up. Her face had grown so pale that the weals on it showed dark. The swollen cut lips opened and shut and she moistened them. "Clothes? I

don't remember," she stammered. "How can I—after this? It's brutal of you."

"You say you don't know," Lacy frowned. "Then here is a question which you must be able to answer. Are the clothes you wore yesterday afternoon in your house?"

"Of course they are," she gasped. "They must be."

"Very well. I have one more question. Will you please take off your gloves?"

She drew back with a sudden violent movement. "No, I won't. How dare you!" Her voice went high. "It's an insult. You've no right." Lacy rang his bell and stood up. "Ah, don't you touch me!" she screamed.

"I have no intention of touching you, Mrs. Carson. I must tell you I am not satisfied with your answers. You will be detained here. I make no charge at present. I advise you to send for your lawyer. Take her away, sergeant."

"You daren't!" she muttered glowering at him. "Major—you can't!"

"This way, please," said the sergeant, and between him and the man who had been taking notes she was pushed out. Lacy sat down again and wiped his brow.

"Splendid, major," said Reggie. "You've got her. Very neat work."

CHAPTER XXXVI

NOTHING FROM INSPECTOR LUCAS

LACY LEANED HIS head on his hand. "This has been a dreadful affair, Fortune."

"My dear chap!" Reggie purred. "Not nice, no. Not a nice woman."

"Who would have thought that Ludlow——"

"Yes. Spirit of power. And a mind. Played a great game. Same like he said. No conscience. Had a soul though. Lost well, didn't he? Not for sale, his soul, at the last stress. Man worth knowin'."

"Do you believe what this wretched woman said—it was he contrived Carter's death?"

"Sorry. Unpleasant to believe the Carson female. But we have to. Her evidence his only reason for killin' himself. Rather die than let her off his wife's murder and put it on Christabel. The Carson female never thought of that. Nasty blow for her." Reggie laughed. "She's feelin' a much injured woman. She always will. Happy nature. However. She's goin' to need it. Now and on."

Lacy moved uncomfortably. "You—you put things strangely," he complained. "Are you satisfied, Fortune?"

"Wouldn't say that, no," Reggie answered slowly. "Ought to have done better. Wanted more confidence in myself. A felt want, major. Sorry. However. Not too bad."

"I mean about this woman, Mrs. Carson. Do you think we can prove her guilty? I am very uneasy."

"Oh major! My dear major! That's all right. You——"
Ive came into the room. "I heard that you had returned,"

he said in his most sarcastic tone. "May I ask with what result, major?" He ignored Reggie.

"Certainly, I shall be glad to have your opinion," Lacy answered in a nervous hurry. "There have been very grave developments." He told the story . . . Ive listened without a comment, without a change of his prim, contemptuous expression.

"Now, now, will you tell me what you think?" Lacy concluded.

"You appear to have handled these people drastically," said Ive. "I am not to judge your methods, Major Lacy."

"Do I understand you consider there was anything improper in the questions put to them?"

Ive pursed his lips. "Come on," Reggie encouraged him. "Will you say that, Ive?"

"I shall not," Ive glared at him. "The questions you report to me are quite in order. But I must point out that while Ludlow's suicide may be taken as confirming Mrs. Carson's accusation he contrived Carter's death——"

"May it really?" Reggie chuckled. "Fancy that!"

"On the other hand," Ive raised his thin voice, "Ludlow's statement that she murdered his wife is of no value whatever as evidence."

"Are we downhearted?" Reggie smiled. "No. He won't mind."

"It does not appear to me a matter for levity, Fortune," Ive rebuked him.

"It is not. Why won't you take it seriously? Evidence against Mrs. Carson, not what Ludlow said, but what she said—and wouldn't say. Why wouldn't she tell us what clothes she had on when Mrs. Ludlow was being killed? Why did she say I wasn't to feel her pulse? Why did she say she wouldn't take off her gloves? Well?"

"I am to suppose you infer that the clothes she wore are stained with Mrs. Ludlow's blood and that her hands or arms were scratched in the murder," said Ive. "I must

point out the woman said all her clothes were in her house. That does not suggest to me fear of what will be found there. As to any scratches upon her, you have already a man suspect who bears injuries of that kind."

"My poor Ive," Reggie sighed. "Best you can do? Our Mr. Gower didn't hide his scratches."

"Gower was involved with the young woman whose car spanner was used for the murder. You choose to forget that now, Fortune."

"Not me. No. The spanner is fundamental. And Mrs. Carson let out she knew a tool from a car killed Mrs. Ludlow. Then covered herself quick. Said Ranford told her she was hit with a car spanner when she was stunned in the church. Not so good, Ive. She wasn't. And she knows she wasn't. She fell while eavesdroppin'. Ranford gave her the bright idea how to kill Mrs. Ludlow."

"Most ingenious, Fortune," Ive sneered. "But you must not persuade Major Lacy to put it before a jury. It has no value as evidence. You——"

The opening of the door stopped him. Lucas came in.

"My dear chap!" Reggie sprang up. "You have been goin' it." Lucas slouched across the room, bent and heavy footed and dropped on to the chair Reggie put for him with a grunt. "Just about all in, what? Have a drink?"

"No, thank 'e, sir. I've had a cup o' tea."

"Have you! Humph!" His Chief snorted at him. "Not in any hurry to report. What the devil have you been doing all this time?"

Shoulders hunched, big head thrust forward, Lucas answered with a surly stare: "That's right. I have been on the go some time, sir. Sorry you're not satisfied."

"I've had nothing from you yet," Lacy barked at him. "What are you bringing me now?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. It's took a bit of doing to get nothing," Lucas was respectfully sullen. "If I may say so, nothing about this one and that one is helpful. There's

the bit about Gower. When he went off my chaps went through his cottage and found the shirt I sent along, but no other garment with any bloodstains and the woman who does for him said all the clothes he has were there. So I suppose that's nothing. Then Miss Biggs being gone off too, my sergeant saw her maid and heard she'd nipped away. Perhaps she heard my S.O.S. Maybe you've seen her, sir. Perhaps that was nothing too."

"Miss Biggs and Gower both came here. I have detained them," Lacy told him.

"Ah. Well, her being gone my sergeant had a talk with her maid and she said Miss Biggs wore a green tussore frock all day and nothing else. No coat, I mean."

"Oh yes. Kind ladies saw her at the church in green tussore," Reggie smiled. "That's all right. Go on."

"Well, sir, the maid was easy with my sergeant, let him see this green frock. And it was all right. Not a stain on it. So that's nothing again."

"I want to know what you've been doing yourself," Lacy demanded.

"I was working other lines, sir. People round the church. All of 'em. I tried Mr. Troove. Very sticky he was. He kept on telling me he saw nobody, knew nothing, he didn't go to the church till evening, he was in the rectory all the time. I asked him what clothes he had on and he got wild, said he always wore the same clothes, scolded and pushed me off. After that I sent instructions to have all the paths round looked over for any signs of anything."

Ive tittered. "You are full of resource, inspector."

"Sir?" Lucas scowled at him.

"Means you take pains," Reggie murmured. "Mr. Ive just sits and thinks."

"I see," Lucas nodded.

"Is that all you have done?" Lacy exclaimed.

"No, sir. I've put in quite a bit of work at Mrs. Carson's place. When I got there first she hadn't got up, though

it was past eleven. I said not to worry her and passed the time with the servants, asking 'em if they saw any folks going to the church yesterday. Her windows have a rare view, you know. But the servants only gave me a lot of fluffy talk. After trying them out, I sent up a message to Mrs. C. I was waiting to speak to her. She had me taken to her bedroom. She was still in bed, sort of weak and languid, she seemed. She said Mrs. Ludlow's death had been such a shock, her heart had gone queer. When I asked about her seeing anybody near the church, she told me she was at home all the afternoon and asleep. She has to sleep after lunch, not being strong since the attack on her in the church, so she couldn't help me, she wished she could, it was dreadful, and so on. There again, that was nothing. And I didn't see my way to get any more from her. But that about her having been attacked in the church gave me a jolt. As we never believed she was. Well, not having done any good with the inside servants I left the house and tried the gardeners. Mrs. C. has two, head and under. The young one's a half-wit. The head's Scotch and as close as they're made. I had a rare old do with 'em and here's what I got. They hadn't seen anybody going down to the church, they couldn't, they were both picking raspberries in the kitchen garden. Both, if you please. 'The mistress's orders,' says the Scottie. Then I had him show me round. The kitchen garden is all at the back of the house, where they couldn't see the way to the church. All that seemed a bit funny to me. And on the way round I noticed a hammock slung under some trees. That give me an idea. I asked 'em did Mrs. C. lie down there in the afternoon and the Scottie said: 'Ay,' like he was riled and the half-wit giggled. I could see they don't care for her much, so I put it nasty, she was in the hammock yesterday keeping an eye on them and their raspberries, eh? And I got out of 'em she was so, but not all the time they were picking."

"This is very useful!" Lacy exclaimed. "You have wasted your day to find out what I know already. Mrs. Carson told me herself she slept in the hammock."

"Did she really, sir?" Lucas answered sullenly. "So that's nothing again. Only she gave me to understand she was sleeping indoors. It would be after my working her gardeners she mentioned the hammock to you. Did she happen to tell you also what clothes she was wearing?"

Lacy sat up. "No, she said she couldn't remember. Have you found out?"

"Funny her not remembering," Lucas sniffed. "Might be nothing again. Well, sir, I did waste a bit of my time asking the gardeners. The Scottie shut up tight, but the half-wit is quite sure she had a long grey coat on, like beech bark, he said, sort of dark grey, that would be."

"Oh yes," Reggie smiled. "Good, inconspicuous colour. And then, Lucas?"

"Why then, I faded out, sir, as you might say, but keeping my eye on the house. After a bit I saw Mrs. Carson drive off, which I hoped for. I had her followed. But of course you know she went over to Mr. Ludlow's." From under his heavy brows he looked, like a stubborn bull, at Lacy. "I've heard you met her there, sir."

"I told her to meet me there," Lacy frowned.

"Thank you, sir. Very helpful, that was. I nipped up to the house again and had a go at her maid. After a grilling she owned it, Mrs. C. did lie down in the hammock from about two o'clock wearing a grey silk frock and a long grey coat, thin woollen stuff. I asked to see 'em. She made a lot of fuss. I got on the 'phone and rang up Ludlow's. They told me Mr. Ludlow was dead and you'd taken Mrs. C. away. I gave the maid that and she wilted. Well, she brought me just the frock and she looked pretty green over it. There's no stains I can see, but it's a good deal mussed up. She swore she couldn't find the coat, couldn't make out what Mrs. C. had done with it. So

that's funny too, the coat Mrs. C. couldn't remember she had on, that's missing. But, of course, may be nothing. I was coming away when one of my chaps who'd been working the paths turned up with a handkerchief he found in the dirt by a cuckoo gate between Mrs. C.'s house and the church. Here you are, sir." He laid it on the table. "A woman's handkerchief, all bloody, and initials embroidered A.C., and Mrs. C.'s first name is Angela."

"Suits her," said Reggie and held up the filthy handkerchief by one corner.

"Maybe," Lucas kept his sullen gaze fixed on his Chief. "But there! I can't prove when it was dropped. So I suppose that's nothing too. But there's all I've got, sir."

"My dear chap!" Reggie chuckled. "Brilliant work. What about it, Ive?"

"I am impressed by the inspector's co-operation with you," said Ive in a tone of acid malice.

"Oh no. No. Not with me, with the chief constable. He was in control. You have pulled it off, major. Good brain at the head knows how to get well served."

"Thank you, thank you," Lacy was embarrassed. "Lucas has certainly some remarkable results. Don't you think so, Mr. Ive?"

"Suspicion against Mrs. Carson has been strengthened," said Ive primly.

"My poor Ive!" Reggie laughed. "Value as evidence pretty good, what? Soon give you some more. I'll get on to this handkerchief, major. You'll be sending Lucas with a search-warrant to Mrs. Carson's house. We'd better have our Angela's coat." He put his hand on Lucas's heavy shoulder. "Sorry, old man. Are you good for a bit more?"

"I'd like it," Lucas growled.

"That's the spirit. Not a nice woman. No."

So

"Do you think we shall find the coat?" Lacy asked.

"Oh yes. Somewhere. Hard to destroy in a house full of servants. It was wool. And hard to clean. Lot of blood on that coat. She was furious, when killing. Oh I say, major, Christabel Biggs—she's all right now. Let her out. And Gower. Had heavy weather. Not too bad, Christabel. Well. On you go, Lucas. Sooner it's over the sooner to sleep." He departed with the handkerchief. . . .

Two or three hours later he was smoking a pipe in the young doctor's room at the hospital. Lucas came with parcel. "Here you are, Mr. Fortune. Found it in a locked chest in one of the upper rooms. The maid swears it's the one Mrs. C. wore yesterday afternoon." He displayed a grey coat smeared and stained.

"My dear chap! You do deliver the goods." Reggie clapped him on the back.

"You showed me how, sir," Lucas said heavily.

"Oh no, no. You've done the job. Go home, now. Pleasant dreams for Inspector Lucas. Well earned."

"I'd like to make sure this'll fix it on Carson," Lucas answered. "If you don't mind."

"Stubborn fellow. All right." . . .

Reggie rang up the chief constable. "Fortune speaking, major. Blood on Angela Carson's coat. A lot of Group II. Which was Mrs. Ludlow's. A little of Group I. Which is her own. Blood of both groups on our Angela's handkerchief. So there you are. Clear proof she did the murder. You can charge her now. Get her gloves off. I'm comin' round. Dig out Ranford. Want to see her hands and wrists."

He came with the unhappy Ranford to the cell in which Mrs. Carson lay tossing and screaming at the police matron who had searched her. With the matron's stalwart aid, her arms were held still. Across the veins on the right wrist they found the flesh torn by deep scratches which were filled with powder.

"So that is that," Reggie murmured. "Like a dressing on it, Mrs. Carson?"

She spat at him.

As he drove away through the night he whistled to the purr of his car the serene joy of the first movement of Mozart's great G Minor symphony.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WAY OF IT

REGGIE WAS STILL in bed at noon. Plaintive and reproachful he gazed at Bunyard who was telling him that the chief constable had rung up again and he would be very glad if Mr. Fortune would come over as soon as possible. Reggie squirmed and moaned. "Why are people?"

"I couldn't rightly say, sir." Bunyard sucked his teeth.

"No. Some error. Fill my bath."

Less than an hour afterwards, pink of face but drowsy of eye, he wandered into the chief constable's presence and found Ive there, too. "Oh I say!" he complained. "You don't want me."

"My dear Fortune," Lacy was effusive, "I know I have made heavy demands on you. But I thought you would wish to be at our conference."

"So kind." Reggie sighed and sank into a chair. "Well?" He gazed with dreamy amusement at Ive. "Where are you?"

Ive cleared his throat. "I have advised Major Lacy that we have an adequate case against Mrs. Carson."

"You don't say so!" Reggie murmured.

"There is now more evidence than you are aware of." Ive pursed his lips. "What I propose to put to the jury is this: Mrs. Carson had the motive of passion for murdering Mrs. Ludlow—passion for Ludlow. She provided herself a secret opportunity to meet Mrs. Ludlow in the church by retiring to the hammock in her garden and ensuring that the gardeners would not observe when

she left it. The fact of her guilt is shown by her concealment of the coat she wore that afternoon and the finding upon it and upon her handkerchief of the blood of two different persons, one of the same group as herself, one of the group to which Mrs. Ludlow belonged. Confirmation will be provided by your evidence that blood of Mrs. Carson's group was found upon the coffin and the vestment chest and blood of Mrs. Ludlow's upon the stole. Ranford is ready to testify that the wounds on Mrs. Carson's right wrist were such as would be made by the rough wood of the planks over the coffin. I shall put it that she intended to kill Mrs. Ludlow in the transept but was disturbed by the arrival of those two women and dragged her body hastily down to the crypt and there finished the murder in a frenzy of passion. When she heard the church silent again, she stole out, but her coat was so splashed with Mrs. Ludlow's blood that she stayed to wipe it on the stole before she hurried home by that path on which her handkerchief was found. No doubt she took off the coat before entering the house, and bundled it up. As she could neither cleanse it nor destroy it without betraying her action to the servants she hid it away."

"Quite," Lacy broke in. "Just so. That is exactly what Fortune told us."

"I have never denied Fortune's ingenuity," said Ive with a sour smile. "But he has no doubt observed that there are some awkward defects in the case."

"You flatter me," Reggie's eyes opened wide with the look of a surprised child. "I have not. What are they?"

"Take first the question of the weapon, the spanner. The evidence is it came from Miss Biggs' car."

"My poor Ive! Too easy. Miss Biggs often left her car on the hills. Seen it myself. Lots of people have seen it. Major Lacy will get plenty swearing to that. I should say he'll find some to swear they've seen Mrs. Carson near it. The Ludlows were well liked. Try the man Noke, major."

"I concede the difficulty may be got over," said Ive. "But the proof of motive is inadequate. We have Ludlow's statement before he committed suicide that Mrs. Carson was trying to buy him. But it was made in answer to her charge that he murdered Carter and Davis. It has little value as evidence."

"As you said before," Reggie sighed. "Other evidence of our Mrs. Carson's hate of Mrs. Ludlow. Anonymous letters on an intrigue between Mrs. Ludlow and Troove. Haven't proved the Carson woman wrote 'em. But somebody put something to Troove which made him stay away from church at the time of the murder. You'll have him in the witness-box. He may still not own up who did. But I think he will. I think he'll say Mrs. Ludlow asked him not to meet her any more because there was nasty talk of him and her. And you can take it that nastiness is what the Carson woman passed to Mrs. Ludlow at that dinner when she got her alone."

"You may take it so," Ive sneered. "You can show no proof. There is the weakness of your case, Fortune. But I am now able to make it good. In Mrs. Carson's handbag was found a letter from Carter. It demands money from her under a threat of exposing Ludlow's connection with the murder of Davis and clearly implies that she had an intrigue with Ludlow."

"Oh yes. Yes. Bad man, Carter. Mean man," Reggie murmured. "Thought you'd get something on that when you looked through Mrs. Carson's things. Quite clear she was sure she'd got a pull on Ludlow, whatever she did. That's why she killed Mrs. Ludlow. Felt herself safe to capture him and smash Christabel's chance. Well, well. So the Carson took Carter's letter with her when she called on Ludlow by request of Major Lacy. Quite a clever woman. Rubbed it into Ludlow she had him where she wanted him. Remember 'em when we came in on 'em, major? Frozen stiff, both of 'em. And Ludlow had already put

down a dose of cocaine. She is clever, our Angela. But rather a low view of human nature. Couldn't imagine there are things a fellow like Ludlow won't do. Murder, oh yes, if and as convenient. Sell himself? No. Her error."

Ive sniggered. "Admirable, Fortune. Of course you understood the whole case from the first. You have foreseen everything."

"Not me, no," Reggie sighed. "Haven't been very good. Too diffident. What I did see from the first, from the time I heard of the church bell ringin', wicked forces at work in Hurst. Took me a long time to trace 'em out. Great man, Ludlow. Played a great game. Not all for himself. Given a lot of people a better life than they ever had. Gambler, oh yes. Ruthless. Poor little Davis wouldn't stand for the big gamble on the radio works. So Ludlow arranged with Carter to wipe out Davis. One of the best murders in my time. He beat us on that. But we did manage to spoil the gamble. Crabbed Jove Radio so he couldn't collect on it. Carter was in a jam. Carter tried blackmail. Out with Carter too. Well done again. Ludlow might have won the whole great game if Carson woman with her greedy passion hadn't crashed in on it. Quaint world."

"You have managed the case quaintly," said Ive.

"Managed?" Reggie gave a crooked smile. "My only aunt! Nothing like that. Took what was handed me."

"I was referring to the confrontation of Mrs. Carson and Ludlow," Ive sneered. "You must admit now we could have made our case against Mrs. Carson without that."

"Oh yes. Yes. Always thought we could."

"And so avoided Ludlow's suicide and brought him to justice too. But you have a weakness for Ludlow."

"My poor Ive!" Reggie murmured. "Do you suppose Ludlow thinks so? No. We could have hanged Mrs. Carson anyway. But Ludlow? Bein' on trial for murder she'd have accused him of murderin' Carter and Davis."

What's that worth? Nothing. You would have put in Carter's letter to her, would you? Blackmailin' letter on the face of it. And all your mighty labours haven't dug up proof of connection of Ludlow with Carter's radio works. No. Not a bit of evidence against Ludlow to count, once we charged Mrs. Carson with Mrs. Ludlow's murder. Only way to get him, to drive him into a corner without his knowing we had what would damn her word. And so we got 'em both." He turned to Lacy. "Great stroke of yours, major, forcin' a show-down between 'em. That won the game. Congratulations, may I?"

"Thank you, thank you, I believe it was the best way," said Lacy nervously.

"My dear major. The only way. You'll be famous. Well. There we are, Ive. Don't look so happy."

"It is reverence." Ive's thin lips smiled.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

EVENING BELL

THE DOG DINGO lolloped through the heather, chasing what was not, returning to declare himself a mighty hunter before the Lord but utterly at the service of his man and his man's woman.

Sally stood still, looking away from Cloudesley to the church tower thrusting out of the trees below the gleam of the windows of Miramar. "That woman," she said and shuddered. Dingo pushed his cool nose into her hand.

"He's telling you there are others, lady. It's a wise dog, our dog."

"Tommy! Did you ever think Mr. Ludlow——"

"No," Cloudesley said sharply. "Wash that right out. Ludlow was straight with his wife. He had no use for the Carson female. Believe me."

"Why did he kill himself then?"

"No life left to live."

"Because that woman murdered his wife?"

"Do you wonder it broke him?"

"But did it?" She turned on Cloudesley, her broad brow wrinkled, distress in her eyes. "Tommy, do you believe it was just that? The other murders—little Davis, Carter—and poor Fay—all that couldn't have been Mrs. Carson. But Ludlow—do you know anything?"

"I do not, lady."

"You've always stood up for Mr. Ludlow."

"Sure. He was a big man. He's done big things. Look at it," Cloudesley pointed to the long eruption of building on the flat land below. "All that out of nothing. Hosts

of poor folks having a darned good time, thanks to David Ludlow."

"Yes, I know." Her frown deepened. "So you'd back him up whatever he did. Even if—if he murdered people for money."

"Not fair, lady. I told you, I never knew anything to show he did. Take that. I don't lie to you. No fun."

"Oh, Tommy!" Her hand closed on his arm.

"Very well so." He kissed her.

"My dear." She smiled with tears in her eyes. "It's been so horrible."

"Finish with it," said Cloudesley. "Carry on." He took her in his arms.

The dog Dingo came barking delight, jumped at them and fled barking. "Curse the hound," said Cloudesley and let her go, swung round and saw Dingo gambolling in front of a man whom he conducted towards them. "Look what he's bringing us. Our blue-eyed boy! Fat man Fortune!"

Sally removed herself a yard. "Why does he come?"

"No tact." Cloudesley's face was of its wonted blank solemnity. "Fancy meeting you, sir. You know Miss Milburn?"

"Oh yes," Reggie smiled. "That's the best of bein' here."

"Not putting it high," said Cloudesley.

"No. Far otherwise. But it was comfortin'. May I say that, Miss Milburn?"

"I don't know why you should." She flushed, her eyes repelled him. She drew back.

"Found me rather"—Reggie made a gesture of disgust—"Like that?"

"You're trying to frighten me now."

"It's the manner, sir," Cloudesley struck in with some violence. "The want-to-make-your-flesh-creep."

"Same like the fat boy in Pickwick. You think so?"

Reggie looked down at his comfortable contours. "Oh no. Don't believe him, Miss Milburn. Lean and hungry fellow. Jealous fellow. I was sayin'—good to meet you. Restful to find someone here I could be sure of. Cheering in the dark."

"Why do you talk like this?"

"Impertinent of me. Confessin' a debt. Returnin' thanks."

"No, you're not. You're hitting at Mr. Cloudesley."

Cloudesley laughed. "I should worry."

"Cloudesley's all clear," said Reggie. "Thought you might like to have that from me."

"You are impertinent." She blushed and was haughty.

"Am I?" Reggie turned to Cloudesley with a dreamy smile.

"Damn you, sir, you are!" said Cloudesley between his teeth.

"Well, well. Have you told her, then?"

Cloudesley glared at him.

"What do you mean?" Sally cried.

Reggie made a gesture to Cloudesley. "I thought he hadn't. Very loyal. Given me a lot of trouble. Much better have it out, Cloudesley. What was it you knew about Ludlow on the night Davis was murdered? He said he was in London. Did you see him or his car here?"

Cloudesley stood silent for a moment and then: "You're the devil, sir," he said. "But it's no good to you. A car passed me. I'm not sure whether it was Ludlow's or not."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap!" Reggie reproached him. "Of course you are. That's why you wouldn't mention it. Didn't want to believe Ludlow would kill to win his game."

"He did——" Sally said faintly.

"That is so. A large mind, Ludlow's. Chose a fine, large purpose, smashed anybody who got in the way of it. And yet he had his point of honour. That's what killed

him. Sad world. Commandin' spirit, wasn't he, Cloudesley? Yes. Commanded you. Made you very sticky. You've given me a lot of bother. Doesn't matter now. But you were still botherin' Miss Milburn." He looked at Sally with benign, respectful admiration. "Won't be any more of that now. Well meanin' man. Did it all for the best."

"Is this why you came to us now, Mr. Fortune?" Sally asked.

"Oh yes. Yes. Nothing more for you two. I was quite impertinent."

"Please!" Sally held out her hand.

Reggie took it. "Flesh don't creep? Good." He kissed it and the dog Dingo jumped up to share this affection and licked his face. "General congratulations. Not a bad fellow, the man Cloudesley. But not good enough. However. No use waitin' for one who is, Miss Milburn."

"Thank you, sir. Mr. Fortune's married, Sally," said Cloudesley.

"I am in the way," Reggie murmured and wandered off.

A little while after the red car of Christabel Biggs stopped at Gower's cottage. She had to wait some time before her ringing brought his shaggy head out of an upper window. "Come on down," she squeaked.

He opened the door. "What is it? What's the matter now?"

She pushed in on top of him. "You are the limit. Why do you make me come and dig you out?" She slammed the door behind her. "When I rang you up, your precious charwoman told me you were busy. Was that from you, my lad?"

"Yes. She is a woman who understands what she is told." Gower made himself his full height to smile down at the angry little face.

"Poor wage-slave," Christabel jeered.

"She does earn her living."

"I'll say she does, doing your dirty work."

"It was no polite lie, madam—"

Christabel gave a spurt of laughter. "Not to notice."

"I was busy. I am busy. You would have had a letter from me to-morrow."

"What a devil it is! He was writing to me!" She linked arms and dragged him into his sitting-room. "Come on, my hero. Let's have—" She stopped to look round the room which was in a chaos of disorder, books piled on the floor, pictures down from the walls, the hearth buried beneath papers. "Golly, here's a happy little home. How did you get it this way? Throes of genius, making up a tale for me? Or all-in wrestling with the wage-slave?"

Gower drew his arm out of hers to be aloof and superior. "You need not show me how dull you are. I allowed for that. If you had waited for my letter it would have explained that I was going away from this place."

"Packing up?" said Christabel. "Quitting! Gosh, you funk."

Gower tossed back his hair and took an oratorical attitude of contempt for her and the universe. "I am happy in your low opinion," he announced. "I—"

She perched on the table and laughed at him. "All *I*! That's you."

"I've endured to remain here to defend you while you needed defence. It is enough and something more. I am not to suffer the blatant publicity which would beset us in Hurst if I stayed while the tortures of the trial of this wretched woman Carson are dragged out. You may like that degradation. I shall not share it."

"Windy!" she cried. "Defend me, my foot." She pointed it at him. "You never did anything in your life but for yourself. You came here and raised a stink to show off what a lad you were. And now you scuttle. Just a coward living for the love of muck."

Gower was white. "I am flattered by your hysterics."

He spoke in a furious hurry. "I've done my part in exposing the villainy of your class, your friends here."

"Bilge," said she. "You played with Fay Carter till she was smashed. You fuddled and muddled to make trouble at the radio works. Now you have the folks there thrown out of their jobs to go on the dole. My class! What class are you? Ludlow got 'em a decent living. You have 'em down and out and you quit. Look at yourself. The devil wouldn't let you into hell."

"The workers—" Gower began.

"That's the limit! Don't you talk about workers. Tuck your tail between your legs and run. Share degradation! You said it, boy. Find a worm to take a bit of yours. I'm seeing this through. Get on with your packing." She sprang from the table, pushed him aside and ran off to her car.

Gower swore at her, at things in general, lit a cigarette and after a minute flung it away, tilted books off a chair and sat down to start up again soon. But he did not go on packing. He moved to and fro for a while, made phrases to himself, then stamped out and strode away up the hill.

In the garden of the Knob Inn Reggie arranged a long chair and lay contemplating benignly the columbines and the lilies and the moving cloud shadows on the heather of the hills beyond.

Christabel's red car shot into sight and stopped. She jumped out, he heard her voice, like a starling's squeak, call: "Bunyard! Bring me a gin and French." She pattered across the garden. If she saw Reggie, she did not choose to see him. She went to a table remote at the garden's farther verge and turned her back to the hills and him.

When her drink was brought she swallowed it at one gulp and drew herself together, elbows on table, chin in hands, looking down to the flat land below on which the eruption of building stood garish against the clear evening light. For some time she sat intent.

Then ringing from the church tower came up on the

wind, not the deep notes of the Mary bell which had called for action against the storm of evil gathering in Hurst, but its treble bell in shrill, insistent clang.

Christabel started up. In one movement Reggie rose from his back to his feet. He came to her side. She stood, her little dark face, tense and fierce, staring still at the jumbled mass of factory and cottage on the flats. "It's all right," said Reggie. "Only the regular evening bell this time. Service as usual."

"God!" Her dark eyes flashed at him. "Praying in that church!"

"Yes. Think Ann Ludlow would like it to stop?"

"Don't!"

"Wasn't said to hurt you. You've borne enough. Did want to say—you're good. Do you mind?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were dim with tears.

"This is over. Life don't stop, though."

"Life!" she cried. She flung out a hand to the stretch of raw building below. "How are those people to live now, now Ludlow's broken and dead?"

"So that's what you were thinking of. He did give 'em their start. They'll fight through. Are you going away?"

"What do you take me for?" she said fiercely.

"I was tellin' you," Reggie answered. "Someone quite good."

But she did not wait to hear that. She brushed past him and made haste out of the garden.

Reggie watched her car rush up over the hill, a swift red streak through the sunshine, it flashed and was gone.

The last call of the evening bell died into the rustle of the wind across the heather.

He saw Gower stride along up to the crest of the ridge, stop there and stand there looking beyond.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured.